The youngest of 12 children whose father held down three blue-collar jobs, Alphonso Jackson went from a poor South Dallas neighborhood to an office within blocks of the White House. Jackson, JD '73, was sworn in April 1, 2004, as the 13th secretary of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Along the way, he has spent more than 25 years gaining housing authority and community development experience in public and private spheres.

But he started down another path. After earning a bachelor’s degree in political science and a master’s degree in educational administration from Missouri’s Truman State University, Jackson was thinking about a career in education. A visit to Washington University, where he was checking out a doctoral program in educational administration, took him in a different direction.

“Whenever I got to Washington University, I had a couple of days on campus. I had thought about law, but never really pursued it. I went over and met with Harvey Tettebaum, JD ’67, who at that time was assistant dean. He actually talked me into going to law school,” Jackson recalls. “He convinced me that there’s so much good you can do as an attorney.”

Jackson continues to appreciate the discipline of his legal education: “I think legal education is the greatest education any person can receive because the essence of it is that it teaches you how to think and analyze situations. And that has been just an unbelievably positive aspect of my life.”

He entered the public policy sphere soon after law school when he met James Conway, then a Missouri state senator. The two became friends when Conway asked for Jackson's help in rewriting the state’s juvenile code. Later, when Conway became mayor of the city of St. Louis, he asked Jackson to become the city’s public safety director.

Jackson remembers hesitating and saying, “Mayor, I don’t know anything about fire, emergency medical service, building inspection, etc.” When the mayor countered by saying, “But you’re honest, and I’d like you to do it,” Jackson decided to accept the position.

“It was my first job in public policy,” he says. “I realized at that point that you can effectuate change in public life.”

Jackson went on to run the St. Louis Housing Authority, then spent time in private business before returning to public life as a housing official.
When he moved back to Dallas, he ran the Dallas Housing Authority for more than seven years before becoming president and chief executive officer of American Electric Power Texas, a $13-billion utility company.

Then his longtime friend and former neighbor, a fellow Texan named George W. Bush, invited him to join HUD, a $32-billion agency with 9,300 employees.

Jackson accepted the invitation to become HUD’s deputy secretary and chief operating officer in June 2001. Responsible for the agency’s day-to-day operations, he implemented several measures that improved the agency’s management practices and its morale.

When Mel Martinez, HUD’s secretary, resigned to run for the United States Senate, the president nominated Jackson for this cabinet post. Unanimously confirmed by the United States Senate on March 31, 2004, Jackson was the first deputy secretary to become secretary.

As HUD secretary, Jackson looks at the future in terms of opportunities, not challenges. He cites three key initiatives.

“The major opportunity we have is to complete the agenda the president has set out,” he says. “The president wants to close the home ownership gap that exists in this country. Whites own homes at about 70 percent, but blacks and Hispanics have always been under 50 percent. When the president announced in June of 2002 that we were going to create 5.5 million new minority homeowners, we began to make progress in that effort. As of May 2004, we had created 1.5 million of those 5.5 million. And as of April 2004, the minority population of this country was over 50 percent homeowners for the first time in the history of this country.”

Jackson also cites the importance of the Single-Family Affordable Housing Tax Credit Act, now before the United States Congress. This legislation is designed to stimulate the construction of new or renovated housing in inner cities by providing tax credits for developers. These tax credits would bridge the gap between the cost of developing affordable housing and the price that buyers in lower-income neighborhoods can afford to pay. “If Congress passes that, that’s going to be a real shot that will invigorate the urban areas of our country today,” he says.

“A final point I want to emphasize is the importance of removing some of the barriers that exist to building affordable housing from a rental and homeownership perspective,” Jackson continues. “Many states have regulatory barriers that prohibit people from building a middle-market home in their community.”

Jackson is thriving on his responsibilities as the nation’s highest-ranking housing official. “I have been blessed with numerous, wonderful life experiences, and I place being secretary of HUD right there at the top. To be able to work for the president of the United States and for the American public is absolutely an honor.”