

## Community Q&A: Jill Atchison helps students help themselves

- [Loryn Kykendall Walla Walla Union-Bulletin](#)

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At age 42, Jill Atchison discovered her purpose in life — helping people understand themselves in ways they never thought possible.

While she spent much of her career in personal banking and working as a bank teller, Atchison now works as a mental health counselor at Walla Walla High School.

“Building upon my previous experiences and personal strengths, I knew I wanted to work closely with and help people,” Atchison said.

“People have always shared with me

openly about their lives so moving into counseling therapy seemed very natural to me.”

Atchison was accepted into the counseling in psychology graduate program at Walla Walla University in 2014, as her three kids headed into middle school, high school and college.

She said WWU’s program gave her an opportunity to explore her own history and take a deep look at who she was. She officially became licensed in 2021.

“The whole process was extremely difficult but necessary,” Atchison said.

“Being a therapist is an ongoing, internal investigation of who I am and learning how I can be a better person and more effective therapist.”

Atchison works as a counselor through The Health Center, which is a nonprofit organization that provides mental health services at both of Walla Walla’s high schools and middle schools. Atchison also comes from a family who's been in the area for seven generations, and she has lived in Walla Walla her whole life.

“I love working at the high school, working with the kids, and hopefully being a part of our next generation,” Atchison said.

Below are Atchison’s answers to questions about her career.



### **Why did you want to work with students?**

I first began working with students during my internship at Walla Walla University. It was a great opportunity to meet young people at different levels of maturity and life — those just starting college with the challenges that it brings as well as students about to graduate and move on to their next stage of life.

After completing my education and training at WWU, the opportunity to join the team at The Health Center Wa-Hi location became available. I was excited about continuing to work with students knowing this is a challenging time for many young people. The students who come into The Health Center are

provided a safe environment to explore and dig deep into themselves and our work is making a difference in their lives.

**What's your favorite part of the job?**

It is an honor and privilege to work with students who are doing the hard work of discovering new things about themselves, learning to manage negative and positive experiences and accept that circumstances occur in life. I get to see those same students come out the other side and understand more clearly how capable they are to live their lives on their terms.

**Do you find your work rewarding?**

Working as a mental health therapist at The Health Center is very professionally and personally rewarding. Each person has their own story, which is valuable. Providing a safe space for students to talk about their daily life, share tools and valuable techniques that assist them to be more successful, then seeing them blossom is wonderful. As I work with students, I definitely learn from them and grow personally and professionally as well.

**What kind of impact do you hope to have on the students you work with?**

My hope is that when these students graduate or are no longer meeting with me, they will have learned how to rely on themselves. I want to give them the tools they need to maneuver through life and understand the importance of self-care. I hope I give them a sense of security while we are working together and the confidence that they can achieve what they desire in life, even if situations slow the process, they can handle it. Maybe one day they will remember the time with me and relay information they have learned onto someone else.

**Do you have any favorite memories from your time at The Health Center?**

I received a card from a parent of one of my clients. This parent expressed to me she could see a significant change in her daughter and thanked me. A lot of times I don't necessarily see a significant change in a client. Many times there is uncertainty in our work. When a parent can see change, it is something special. However, when a student can recognize in themselves a change, it makes my work so much more special.

*Loryn Kykendall reports on health care and education. She can be reached at [lkykendall@wwub.com](mailto:lkykendall@wwub.com).*