

Geraldine Cochran is a mentor in the field of Physics at the Rochester Institute of Technology. But if you told her fifteen years ago that this would be her role, she never would have believed you.

When Geraldine was seventeen years old, she met Mel Sabella, a research advisor who eventually became her strongest mentor and her greatest supporter. Still in high school, Geraldine had no plans for going to college. Sabella changed that.

Sabella was different from anyone that Geraldine had met. He was very personable and kind, but he went beyond the roles of an advisor and made sure he connected with his students. According to Geraldine, Sabella was known for attending his students' extra-curricular activities, meeting their families, and generally taking the time to get to know his mentees. "He took a real interest in our lives," Geraldine says.

For the first few years of her academic career, Geraldine was unsure about her ultimate goal of becoming a physicist. In high school, her physics teacher had told her, "Physics is for guys who are going to be engineers." It was Sabella, however, who convinced her otherwise. He would respond to her concerns by telling her that she was a "typical physicist" – and he would support this statement by referencing her research style, her perseverance, her approaches to problems, and even her study habits and quirks. "I didn't see myself as a physicist," says Geraldine. "I didn't know if I fit, if I belonged. And he constantly affirmed for me that I did."

As a mentor herself now, Geraldine does her best to emulate Sabella with her own students. "He had such high expectations for us," she recalls. "He always kept my confidence. I know that seems like a no-brainer, and like everyone should do that, but... they don't." Sabella was the kind of mentor that pushed his students to plan for the future, and introduced possibilities and potentials that they hadn't even considered. "He put me on the trajectory that I needed to be on," Geraldine says, even though she admits having strayed from the path more than once.

Geraldine decided to leave the graduate program and become a high school science teacher. Apprehensively, she told Sabella about her plan – and was shocked when he told her to go for it. "You would impact so many more students," he had said. And so, she did just that. But Sabella wasn't one to lose contact with a student, current or former. He invited Geraldine to work on research projects, kept her in contact with the department, and even asked her to write a paper with him.

In the end, Geraldine simply missed her research too much. "What will people think?" she recalls asking Sabella. "I already left the program. Will anyone want to take me on?" But Sabella, as always, had an answer for her. He told her that with experience as a high school physics teacher (and with writing a paper), she was an even better candidate than she had been before. He'd known all along that she would come back – and his unending support and confidence in her made the transition that much easier.

Geraldine has been able to apply much of Sabella's mentoring style to her own students, though she's not quite as active in their personal lives. "I'm afraid," she admits. "I don't know how far I should go, or how comfortable they will be." But she is a mentor, and she loves what she does.

"It's worth it to figure out what's needed for each individual student," she says, noting that mentors need to "realize that they're working with humans – there's no cookie-cutter approach to mentoring." Geraldine hopes that more people will want to become mentors in the future, scientists especially.

"He was there when we came in the mornings, and we knew he would be there in the evenings," Geraldine says of Sabella. "We saw his dedication – he really invested a lot of time in us and in his profession." What better qualities of a mentor could there be?