

Charlene Gray was ready to move forward with her Master's project. She had chosen a topic focusing on ants and their interactions with weather and climate with her mentor, Robert Warren, and was ready to move forward when the news broke: a PhD student had just completed similar research, in much greater depth than her project could hope to achieve.

Warren didn't hesitate. Having noticed Charlene's impressive work with agar plates as a TA in his lab, he introduced a potential new project for her to consider – on the micro level. "It was a bit of a shock," says Charlene. "He gave me the choice. He wasn't forcing me to do anything, but this was such a great opportunity." So she took a chance, and it opened up her entire future.

In studying ants at the micro level, Charlene gained experience in a variety of areas, from fieldwork to technology. And that experience has made all the difference. "If you have that experience, it makes you an excellent candidate in a variety of labs," Charlene says, noting that if it weren't for Dr. Warren, she may not have had the opportunity to progress as far as she has.

According to Charlene, Warren is a team player, through and through. "He's very big on collaboration," she says, citing his humility and his eagerness to work cohesively with his colleagues. "He's very much about gaining more insight, and if you spread the work out, you're much more likely to do that. And he talks to you like you're an equal. It's helpful when you have that kind of respect coming from your mentor."

In fact, over the past two years, Warren has made Charlene's graduate experience one of empowerment and success. "I truly think like a scientist," she says proudly. "I wasn't like that before I came to grad school. I now have the ability to look at a problem as an issue that I want to understand more." She emphasizes the importance of Warren's policy of admitting when you are unsure. "You're expected to work and to research and to gain further knowledge," she says, referring to Warren as "a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage."

"That was the best thing for me," she recalls. "Just having that independence and being able to focus in and go." Warren, according to Charlene, is a hands-off mentor; he gives his expectations, makes sure you're up for it, and then sends you on your way. "Other people might have difficulty with it," she says of Warren's mentoring style, "but I think it's been an excellent teaching tool in many ways."

As a mentor, Charlene couldn't have asked for a better fit than Warren. "I have such an affection for the man," she says, "for what he's done and for the person he is and how he treats us." Charlene goes on to cite his curiosity – "There's no end to it!" she laughs – and his academic integrity as key characteristics that make him such a wonderful mentor. "He and his wife also invited the whole lab over for dinner, more than once," she recalls. "It was lovely!"

And other mentors can learn from him. "Be human," says Charlene. "Be friendly, and be approachable!" From her own experiences with undergraduate students, Charlene has further advice for mentors and professors alike: "You have to adapt to your student population," she says, clearly passionate about the topic. "We're getting a lot of people from different cultures, a lot of people who haven't had great experience with authority figures or educators, but they've gotten this far. They've worked hard. They're not lazy. Teach them!"