

Damon Mullis didn't know what he was getting into when he decided to go back to undergraduate school in biology and fisheries as an adult. But his freshman year, he found a first-year professor who would change his entire life.

Damon took an environmental biology class with Checo Colon-Gaud that had over 200 people in it. He didn't expect to get noticed, he just expected to do well. Then, at an event for his daughter's ballet school he ran into his professor, whose daughter attended the same school. This chance interaction was the beginning of Damon's professional career.

Colon-Gaud was still settling in as a professor and needed help setting up his lab. After hearing the similarities between his own interests and Colon-Gaud's field of study, Damon immediately volunteered. "A lot of the time it's easy to be intimidated by professors," he says, "but he was just really open and inviting." According to Damon, the lab work started out with mostly menial tasks, and as his interest and skills progressed, he was introduced to more advanced lab work.

"He does a really good job of explaining what we're doing and why we're doing it," says Damon of Colon-Gaud. "He wants everyone to understand everything." And so, as a volunteer with a mentor to train him along the way, Damon excelled quickly. "Checo expected a lot from me and he pushed me hard," he says, "but it was never in a negative way. It got to the point where I just didn't want to disappoint. He really cared about my success and was invested in it."

Even when there were setbacks, Colon-Gaud helped Damon through. From a fear of public speaking to less-than-ideal writing communication skills, and even a failed first thesis, his mentor was there to help. "The patience was amazing," Damon says. "If you cloned him, you'd have a lot of great mentors out there."

According to Damon, Colon-Gaud strongly believes in a family environment, with little distinction between work and play. "He has barbecues and cookouts," says Damon, "and when we're out in the field we might bring fishing poles and just go fishing after." It's that environment and high-energy (yet laid back) personality that makes him so great at what he does. "He's only been at it a few years," reflects Damon. "In thirty years... imagine. He's going to have a big impact on the world."

"I view the world completely differently because of him," Damon affirms. "He always preaches the interconnectedness of everything, in life and nature. That's how I see things now. I feel like I am a positive contribution to the world. I'm making my little difference. He's completely changed my life for the better."

In fact, Damon wants more people like Colon-Gaud out there, and he stresses the importance of mentor-matching programs for students who are unaware of the benefits. "It started with a chance meeting that changed my life forever," he says of his mentoring relationship with Colon-Gaud. "Maybe we should make those meetings not so chance."