

Jeramie Strickland believes in early intervention mentoring.

That's exactly why he is involved with so many mentoring programs in the broad field of environmental biology, including Strategies for Ecology Education, Diversity and Sustainability (SEEDS), Minorities Striving and Pursuing Higher Degrees of Success (MS PHD'S) in Earth System Sciences, Turtle Camp Research and Education in Ecology (TREE), and countless others. Strickland loves wildlife, and he loves involving the youth of his community.

"If you wait until students are in college to mentor them, I feel like it's too late," Strickland says. "It's so critical. We can't wait until they get to college." As a mentor, he has been involved in programs that reach out to high school students and college students alike. The goal, according to Strickland, is to get them involved and keep them interested.

That was the case with Nigel Golden, an intern at the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Nigel, an African American high school graduate from Milwaukee, was attending the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, a primarily white college. Overwhelmed and feeling very alone, Nigel wanted to move back home where he would better fit in. But Strickland, Nigel's mentee during his USFWS internship, had something else in mind.

"All he needed was some networking and guidance," Strickland says of his brief yet meaningful role as Nigel's mentor. Having discussed his options and his potentials in the field, Nigel went on to work as a research assistant at UW, qualify as a forestry project specialist, perform work in Siberia studying climate change, and study environmental science and natural resource management in Germany, Poland, and Iceland. "He graduated with dual majors in wildlife ecology and biology," says Strickland, adding that Nigel is now going on to get his PhD at the University of Massachusetts in environmental conservation. "He's living his dream, and he's having fun. He's not just a statistic."

Strickland cites his ability to relate to his mentees as a root cause to his mentoring success. "Just like Nigel, I was a first generation college student," he says. "He trusted me knowing that I wasn't encouraging him to do something that I hadn't done, or considered, or experienced previously." And it's that trust that provides a strong foundation for a positive mentorship. "Gaining that trust from the start makes them feel comfortable that they approach you and speak to you when need be," Strickland declares. "Any information that my mentee discloses with me is confidential. I wouldn't judge them. I keep an open mind, and I keep an open heart."

But what about those students that Strickland can't relate to right off the bat? "I try to learn as much as I can about my mentees," he says. "Some of their concerns, short-term goals, long-term goals, and what they think might hinder their goals." Strickland also stresses the importance of making sure the students are comfortable, noting that at times, text messaging proved to be more productive for Nigel than

actually sitting down and discussing things face-to-face. "He was better at texting than at actually speaking," Strickland admits. "It helped him gain his confidence." He also notes that such flexibility makes him seem more down-to-earth and approachable. "That goes a long way," he stresses, as does patience, resilience, and above all, a passion for the position.

"If I hit the lottery today, I'd be doing the same thing tomorrow that I'm doing now," Strickland says. "I'm doing it because I know they need it. I know what it's like to have that struggle. And I know what can come of it if you make the right decisions."