

Betsey Boughton was an intern in a lab when she was introduced to her future mentor. “When I first met him, he was a post-doc and I was an intern,” she says of Pedro Quintana-Ascencio. “But even as a post-doc, he thought he could learn a lot from me. That fostered a very deep feeling of respect.” And that respect has been the foundation of a strong and lasting mentor-mentee relationship. “He truly values people from all levels.”

Betsey, now a research scientist at a nonprofit, stuck with Quintana-Ascencio for the remainder of her academic career, and it was good that she did. During her PhD, Betsey had a child, and began to worry about spreading herself too thin with the amount of work she had been used to. “I remember him telling me that it’s important to balance work with family,” she says, noting that most professors require their PhD students to work eight-hour lab shifts. “Without his support, I probably would’ve had to drop out. That was really key to my success, how supportive he was of me and my family, and of me being a mother.”

And Betsey has learned more than just empathy from her mentor. When the unexpected occurred, whether in the lab or in the field, Quintana-Ascencio would approach it with a smile on his face and excitement in his heart. “That passion for experiencing the moment was something I learned from him,” she says. “He loves to have fun. He loves to problem-solve and work things out.”

But nothing compares to Quintana-Ascencio’s love of teamwork. “He’s highly collaborative,” recalls Betsey. “He would always encourage us to get feedback from lots of people so we weren’t working in a bubble. He wants to be there with you, doing the grunt work.” In fact, Quintana-Ascencio’s collaborative spirit is one of the things that stuck with Betsey. “He didn’t place himself above you. He didn’t believe in the student-teacher dichotomy,” she says of their mentor-mentee relationship. “He felt like he was the student the whole time.”

When asked about the qualities that made Quintana-Ascencio such an effective mentor, Betsey first cites his bilingualism as a big positive. “He started out with a language barrier,” she says. “He had to work with someone to learn English. Now, he’s kind of like a bridge for Spanish-speaking students.” According to Betsey, Quintana-Ascencio integrates many Hispanic minority students into the biology department simply by reaching out and talking to them, and from there, the other professors dive in.

But more than that, Betsey appreciates Quintana-Ascencio’s openness, emphasis on communication, and easygoing nature. “His door is always open,” she notes. “And he invites people to go canoeing, or has people over to his house to eat. He loves paella,” she laughs.

“I want to emulate Pedro,” concludes Betsey. “Love what you’re doing, and really live in the moment.”