

So often we see students come into college knowing exactly what they will be doing with their lives – but not what that they *want* to do. DiAnna Hynds, a mentor at Texas Woman's University, has had more than her share with these types of students. Such was the case with Jo Contrarus.

"I could tell from the moment I met her that she was a researcher," recalls Hynds. The two first met when Jo became involved in several of Hynds' training programs. A minority student with significant financial pressures, Jo was selected to be a part of many of these programs, including the NIH Bridges to the Baccalaureate program and the NSF Scholarships for STEM program. And the transformation, says Hynds, was astounding.

When Jo first came to Texas Woman's University after attending a community college, she wanted to be a Physician's Assistant. Or at least, that's what her family wanted. Jo came from an economically disadvantaged family, and they were looking to her to get a job in medicine, so she could financially support her family after college. That strong family connection and expectation is not uncommon with underrepresented minority students. Jo was on her own at the university: she had a clunky truck with terrible gas mileage, and she had a significant commute to school every day. It's no surprise that her goals were financially-oriented.

So Hynds listened to what she had to say. Jo spoke of her goal of becoming a PA, and her reasoning behind it. And when Hynds repeated back what Jo had said, she added one important sentence: "There's a difference between where you're looking to go and what you want to do." And from there, the change began.

"I have enough life experience to tell them to look forward and have something to look towards," Hynds explains. "Empowering is a big part of that." She encouraged Jo to explore the world of research – not just in her own lab at TWU, but through opportunities found at ABRCMS and Summer Research Experiences. These research experiences opened Jo's eyes to the fact that her research could, in fact, help her give back to her community – a realization much more transparent in the field of medicine. Once Jo caught the research bug, it became a matter of convincing her family that this was the right path for her.

So Hynds decided to invite Jo's mother to one of her daughter's research presentations at a regional. Not only was the presentation outstanding, it also won an award. This led to Jo's mother supporting her shift in career goals – or, as Hynds likes to put it, "the family buy-in." Because of her guidance, Jo is now in a PhD program in the field of neuroscience.

When asked about her impact as a mentor, Hynds says, "I give them the tools to talk to their families and say, 'This is really what I'm excited about, and I know it's not what you envisioned for me, but this is how it's going to help me, and this is what I'm going to do with it.'" Hynds also cites services offered by TWU to which she refers some of her struggling students, including writing services and counseling.

But her main technique is to listen. “Don’t be afraid to get to know them on the personal level,” she advises. “That’s the thing that I find most helpful to me as a mentor: talking to that person and figuring out what their motivators are... what types of pressures they’re dealing with.” Hynds also encourages a non-threatening environment with a community vibe, but her advice comes with a note of caution:

“There is no one approach for everybody. So flexibility is one thing you have to work into your style.”