

Alvin Holder is all about positivity. Whether in his personal or professional life, Holder focuses his energy on happiness and optimism. And he applies the same courtesy to his students.

Holder hails from Barbados, and he got his Bachelor of Science in Jamaica. He then moved on to become a faculty member at a local college in Barbados. But when he came to work in the United States, he had to start from the bottom and work his way back up. He was hired on as a post-doc and had to work hard at that position before he was granted the title of “faculty member.” It is that same hard work that he encourages in his students, and it’s the same hard work that he expected from Dorothy Horton and Toyketa Horne.

Dorothy and Toyketa were minority undergraduate students under Holder’s mentorship. Along with several other researchers (including Holder himself), contributed significantly to the production of a top-quality publication. Holder provided minimal supervision in his lab, and only gave his instructions once. Both women have now completed their Masters degrees, and are considering PhDs.

“I want it done right,” he says with a smile, “but even a negative result is a result.” And that, according to Holder, is something to learn from. In fact, Holder encourages his students to document all of their failures, in their professional and personal lives. This helps them to learn from their mistakes and avoid similar situations in the future.

In his laboratory, Holder pushes for clinical, precise work. “If you don’t follow the recipe,” he says, “the cake is going to fail.” But that’s not all he expects within the lab. “Safety is paramount,” he adds. “You have to have common sense first.”

In his students, Holder encourages respect for others – peers and superiors alike. To him, the team is the most important part of a laboratory, and the most important part of a project. “Treat everyone in the group as equals,” says Holder. “Don’t have favorites.” From constructive criticism to shaking hands after a disagreement, collaboration is key, as is giving credit where credit is due.

But most of all, Holder wants his students – and everyone – to experience and live by the positivity that he himself exemplifies. “Don’t work when you’re hungry or tired,” he advises. “Always make sure you’re in a good mood. And every day you wake up, have the same positive attitude – even if it’s just in the elevator.”

“As long as you’re working for me, if you don’t achieve anything other than work, you haven’t done any work.” Holder’s message rings loud and clear: the mentoring process is about more than work. It is about gaining insights and bettering ourselves, and those around us.