

“Lead by example.”

This is a phrase I have heard all my life, and one that I learn, live, and work by. I’ve found that the most impactful lessons are often learned through experiences I have lived through myself. However, I find that hearing the experiences of others, or advice based on another’s experiences, provide information and lessons that are equally as valuable. Hence, I look to others to follow and learn from as well.

My mentor, Michele Joseph, has inspired me to continuously give back to my community through example. Her resilience and dedication to the community have led her to accomplish many projects to connect students that are often underserved and underrepresented with the opportunity to explore social justice and climate change. In fact, I first met my mentor through participating in a community service project she implemented, Letters of Encouragement, where students connected with seniors in nursing homes across three states. By seeing the care and determination with which she treats every project, she has inspired me to do the same and engage more students in community service while solving community problems.

Martin Luther King Jr. was such a good mentor to his mentees precisely because he aligned with the phrase from the beginning: “lead by example.” By working through the problems they faced together, he proved that it was possible to create change in society to his mentees. And by working alongside Dr. King during his planning and execution, his mentees witnessed first hand and partook in this creation of change, leaving them empowered. In addition, Dr. King trusted his mentees and allowed them autonomy to take initiative and attack these issues on their own, providing advice and support when needed. This autonomy allowed them to learn independently while knowing that there was always someone to turn to if they needed help.

Similar to Dr. King, my mentor was fearless and determined in her work. By facilitating many partnerships and connections, she never stopped until she achieved her goal. Whether it was lack of funding for our projects or lack of partnerships, my mentor would attack every opportunity she was given with her all. But like Dr. King’s mentors, she was still always there to give me advice on my own initiatives and encourage me to take on leadership.

I continue to believe that “lead by example” is the best way to inspire others. After all, mentees must first see and interact with what they are learning before they can even begin to understand something. Aside from that, however, I believe that once certain basic principles have been taught to mentees, the right amount of independence to mentees will allow them to explore and potentially discover completely novel ideas of their own. Eventually, with a balance of guidance and autonomy, these mentees will become mentors themselves.