

In Her Mentors' Footsteps

Following a path from student to faculty

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Editor's Note: This is one installment in a series featuring UNH faculty telling their stories in their own words.

Jesse Stabile Morrell, principal lecturer for the nutrition program and director of the UNH in Italy program

" When I think about my journey, UNH has always been a part of the story. As a single parent for much of my childhood, my mother placed a high value on a college education and the self-reliance a degree offered. However, she was also adamant that I not face graduating college with huge amounts of debt.

Our family's commitment to education started with my grandparents, who built a successful life they attributed to my grandfather's GI Bill-funded education. Having lived through poverty and the Depression, they were also frugal and taught their children to save and spend their money wisely.

All through high school, I worked part-time for the urgent care department at Dartmouth-Hitchcock in Nashua and dreamed of going to college in Washington, D.C. — even paying for my own flight to visit my dream school. I was accepted, but my mother was sure that UNH — and its affordability — was the right choice. When the day came to confirm my enrollment at UNH, I was at work. I remember my mother arriving to remind me it was the deadline.

I had wanted to experience the world, so I went to UNH grudgingly. I arrived on campus for the start of my freshman year, refusing to believe I could do that so close to home. My roommate quickly changed my mind. She was her high school's valedictorian and so proud and excited to be here. She took me by the hand — both literally and figuratively — and told me we were going to experience everything UNH had to offer. Little did I know I would never leave UNH and that we'd remain friends to this day.

What I found here at UNH was not just so many possibilities but the most supportive community. This support was something I discovered firsthand during my junior year. My daughter was born days before the start of the fall semester, just in time for me to begin my organic chemistry, physics, and microbiology courses. Becoming a parent, your perspective changes, and I was really thinking about what kind of career I wanted. I had first come to UNH as a nursing major, and I still wanted to do something related to human health, yet I was unsure where my new major — nutrition — was going to take me.

I wondered if my new status as a "nontraditional" student would limit my opportunities or job prospects. Nonetheless, I applied to work on a summer research project with professor Anthony Tagliaferro. I wasn't sure how a professor would react to a young mother arriving with her infant in a stroller, but he was unfazed by the blue-eyed baby and supportive of the pack-n-play occasionally set up in the corner of his office.

Thinking back to my undergraduate research experience, I know that is when the lights truly came on; it was a defining moment in my career path. I cared about what I was learning, and I wanted to know more and make connections.

I continued to work in professor Tagliaferro's lab, where I learned so much from him and others. In time, he asked whether I was interested in pursuing a graduate degree. As an undergraduate, I had loved UNH's nutrition program. The faculty's commitment to their students was something I had experienced firsthand and deeply appreciated. I had always liked the idea of teaching, but it was as a teaching assistant during my graduate

work that I realized this was where I belonged. Everything fell into place as I was finishing my master's degree when a lecturer position opened up in UNH's nutrition program. It was a gift, really, this opportunity to follow in the footsteps of my own faculty mentors who were so student-centered in all they did.

Today I'm thankful to have been part of the UNH community for the past 20-plus years and for the support the community has offered me and my family. And perhaps most of all, I'm grateful I'm now in the position to help students find similar opportunities that may shape their UNH journey."

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