

Marsha Cole and Sierra Napoleon: Mentorship is Contagious – Season 1, Episode 2

Amy: You're listening to Beyond 1894, a podcast where we hear from Louisiana Tech University scholars, innovators, and professionals on their personal journeys and the impact they are making in the world around them. I'm your host, Amy Bell, and my co-host is Teddy Allen.

Amy: So, Teddy, have you ever been mentored?

Teddy: Yes, thank the lord. I don't know where I'd be if it weren't for certain people in my life who came along and said, "Hey, man, you need some help," and helped me out. So yeah, I've got a lot of those.

Teddy: When I flunked out of school, Patsy Lewis was the Dean of Admissions here, and she helped me get back in. She said, "Go to class, sit up front, and do what you're told." I made A's and B's after that. Sometimes you just need somebody to shake you a little bit. Marsha and Sierra--they started off a little farther. They were more serious than I was when I was their age as students. I had to get serious, but they were already serious, and somebody didn't have to pull them up from the ground floor. They were already, you know, they were already running, and somebody recognized something in that and said, "We're gonna direct this passion in the correct way and get you where you want to go faster." Their story is about chemistry in the classroom, but it's also about chemistry between people.

Amy: Yeah, that's a really good way to say it.

Teddy: The way it struck me when I was listening to it. It was a joy to listen to them.

Amy: I don't remember where I heard this quote. I remember someone once telling me about, speaking about the chemistry between people, when two people have chemistry, they can't help but be changed by it. Like a chemical reaction.

Teddy: Oh, wow, yeah. And I think these are examples of that. Their mentors helped them, changed them, and then once they met each other, I mean, like Sarah saw Dr. Cole and said, "There's somebody like me. That I can really relate to on a whole bunch of levels." Which she talks about in this, and so if you find that in someone else, in a teacher or student, you know, milk it. Keep pounding the rock. There's a lot to be.... I mean, Dr. Cole says she learned stuff from Sierra. Sierra is a student. It's like you say it's a reaction between the two, and who knows how far that can carry each one of them.

Amy: For sure. So, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Marsha Cole and Sierra Napoleon. Dr. Cole is a lecturer in the chemistry department in the College of Engineering and Science, and Sierra is a senior in her capstone class researching homeopathic remedies to treat gynecological infections. In the interview, they discuss their personal journeys, Dr. Cole's

mentorship and teaching styles, Sierra's research, and the differences between homeopathic remedies and manufactured drugs.

Teddy: Bingo!

Amy: Let's go ahead and go straight to that interview.

Amy: So, Sierra, where are you from and what's your background?

Sierra: So, I was born and raised in Quitman, Louisiana, and it's a pretty small village. I graduated from Ruston High, um, and I'm here now at Louisiana Tech. So, for most of my life, I've been basically here in North Louisiana, and I, through the chemistry program here at Louisiana tech, I've definitely solidified that I want to do something in pharmaceuticals.

Amy: When did you first know that you loved chemistry or that you wanted to study it?

Sierra: Um, my first I guess experiment. Um, I would do like science fair projects early on, like in sixth grade and seventh grade. And that was like my first time actually, I guess, conducting some sort of study and being able to find the results from that. And I was like, "Oh, this is really interesting." My first one was on like different types of bridges and like their weight capacities, and I made them all out of popsicle sticks, and I had one that could hold two bricks. And I thought that was really interesting being able to see those results, and then, "Okay, how is this significant?"

Sierra: And for me, I think definitely what led me to chemistry.... Um, first off, well in the ninth grade, when I read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, I thought that was very interesting--that whole story. And in the 11th grade, I had chemistry at Ruston High. I actually took Ms. Freeman, and I thought she was a great chemistry teacher, and, um, she definitely exposed me to how versatile chemistry was and how chemistry is everywhere. And I think definitely being able to bridge those two--like chemistry within biology in a way. Like how chemistry works within your body. Chemistry and how like drugs are made, how drugs are synthesized, how they interact in your body. Just all of that. Um, that really led me to chemistry ultimately.

Amy: What about you, Dr. Cole? Where are you from, and what is your background?

Dr. Cole: So, I'm from Dallas, Texas. Um, I grew up with both of my parents. I have one brother. But even though I grew up with both of my parents, we didn't have the best of financial situations, so oftentimes we were without a home: we lived in motels, we lived in apartments, we lived in houses. Um, you know, I went to probably, I want to say, six different elementary schools just in the K through five time period. I went to two middle schools, and I went to one high school.

Dr. Cole: And really, we moved a lot in the same part of town rather, but um.... I'm in school with all the people that I live with. But when the bell rings, I go to a separate wing in the building where I take my Magnet classes. And in that wing, I'm the only one that looks like me. And if there are any other people that are minority, it's, um, they're first generation from an international family. So, I was literally the only domestic Black American that would be in my class. So, there was a lot of, you know, cultural differences where I didn't feel like I had a lot of friends.

Dr. Cole: A lot of it was... the only thing I could rely on was my intelligence. You know, I was always taught like if you don't have anything, you can always read, you can always like learn. So that was just kinda like a safe place. But that upbringing gave me a lot of reluctance. Partly why I didn't apply to a lot of schools because I didn't think that my parents could afford it. If, you know, I did get accepted, and so I was really scared to go to college.

Dr. Cole: So, um.... When I graduated, I worked, and I made \$11 an hour at a physical therapy office doing accounts receivables. And this, uh, physical therapy assistant--he was the one that asked me why was I there. You know, did I ever think about going to college? Why don't you apply to Grambling? And that's pretty much what initiated that whole process.

Dr. Cole: The first time I came to Louisiana was the weekend I moved into my dorm at Grambling state university. Never been to Louisiana a day before that.

Dr. Cole: There was a lot of people, like at Grambling, that pretty much ordered my steps. Uh, so, you know, there was a lot of people that went to Grambling and then went to LSU, so I went there, and that's where I think I met my, you know, mentor/reference, Dr. Warner. You know, and Dr. Warner was a nature, uh, award recipient for his mentorship, you know, just this past year. And, you know, he's an amazing person. Um, and I'm grateful that I had the people in my life, you know, that sewed into me because I really don't think I'd be where I am if it weren't for those people. And so because of all of those people that sewed into me, and believed in me, and helped me break the stereotype that I think I would have possibly have become, I'm able to, you know, help people like Sierra be better than what maybe she thought she'd be. You know, help her maybe see past the original goal that she had, or even attain the goals much more easily.

Dr. Cole: You know, and then, I think in a way we probably share a lot of the similarities because I am the only Black, you know, person in the chemistry department. So, there's a lot of ways that I fall into a category, but I think that collectively, my perspective helps grow the department, helps grow the university. So we have all of these different mindsets from around the world, and different ages, different genders, and I think mine just adds that little other type of nuance that can help make every one of the students in the department feel like there's somebody, at least one person, they can go talk to, you know?

Amy: Yeah

Sierra: That's one of the big reasons why I was drawn to Dr. Cole because I feel like she's the personification of everything I want to be, but it's in a package that looks like me. And I'm very appreciative that I was able to, I guess, be here while Dr. Cole was here because I feel like, um, I would not have experienced that. Possibly, maybe not even at all, because I don't even know, like if I go to grad school, if I would be exposed to that. I'm definitely grateful that I'm able to have someone that could relate to me as far as maybe, um, being in a classroom and not necessarily seeing people that look like you, or being the only minority, or the only black person, or the only black woman in the class. And um, I guess the different microaggressions that may come with that.

Sierra: So definitely being able to have someone that I can talk to about that. Because I know a lot of people, um, that I know who are in grad school, they have like a mentor that's closely within their field, but then they also have a mentor that may understand, um, different problems that they may experience because of their background, and different things like that. So I think

being able to have almost like a two-in-one with Dr. Cole, I really like, because she knows like the field that I'm interested in, but she can also attest to some of the other things that I may experience.

Amy: How did y'all meet?

Sierra: I always kind of knew about her since she arrived at Tech. Um, we met probably the first time sitting down face to face around February of 2018. I at the time really wanted to do something over the summer. I was at a point where I didn't necessarily know what I wanted to do, like I couldn't pinpoint it, but I had an idea of things that I liked and things that I didn't necessarily like. And at the time, um, when I came here, I was initially looking at pharmacy, but I was like, "I really like drugs. I really liked studying this, but I don't know if pharmacy is necessarily the field that I want to go into."

Sierra: Um, so I was kind of lost, and I had a friend, and he was in Dr. Cole's, um, capstone class whenever he was a senior. And he definitely told me like, "Oh, you need to go to Dr. Cole. You need to talk to her. Like, she'll definitely help out." And so I sent her an email, and I just told her who I was and that I really need some guidance. And she emailed me back and she was like, "Most definitely! You can come by [this day, at this time]."

Sierra: And, um, I remember I had just gotten out of a test, and I went to her office. I originally just told her that, "Hey, I want it to do something this summer, some sort of internship maybe." And I told her about... Well, I gave her my resume and told her about the internship that I wanted to do. And in that, I think we talked for 45 minutes, 60 minutes, and I was able to find an internship to apply to. Um, she gave me membership to a professional organization. She told me about a scholarship. There was just so much that I got from just that one meeting with her. So it definitely helped.

Amy: And you got an internship?

Sierra: Yes, I did. I went to the University of Washington, and I was one of two research interns there over the summer.

Amy: What did you study there, or what did you do?

Sierra: I measured different drug metabolites in the serum of pregnant women who may or may not have HIV.

Amy: Okay. And what was that like? What was it like being, um, doing an internship?

Sierra: I really loved it. I had a lot of independence. I was able to come into the lab, and they had so many resources. And I definitely think that the classes that I took here at Tech, and definitely being able to take your industrial chemistry course, that definitely helped me over the summer, um, with calibration curves and just like statistical analysis as a whole. And just having the confidence to be in the lab because I was in the lab for a long time. I'd be in the lab sometimes for like eight hours a day, or even more.

Sierra: And um, I really enjoyed just being able to have my own experiment, and being able to test it out, see the results. Where do we go from here? We'd have lab meetings. We'd even talk about my project in lab meetings. And okay, like other like grad students would kind of chime in

like, “Okay, how can we maybe fix this problem?” Or, “Okay, for some reason this specific metabolite we can't really measure as well as others. What may be going on?” And I think being able to see that, it really solidified that I want to go to grad school, and I want to do research.

Amy: For sure. And did that help inform the topic that you chose for your capstone paper?

Sierra: Yeah.

Amy: And what is your capstone paper about?

Sierra: So, for my capstone project I'm testing homeopathic remedies, um, when treating them against gynecological infection.

Dr. Cole: And that was pretty interesting because it was like motivated from YouTube.

Sierra: Yes. This project was definitely social media driven because you see a lot of testimonies on YouTube. I even ran across some on like Twitter. And they talk about these products. And the scientific research for these projects is lagging behind the accessibility of the products. So, yeah.

Dr. Cole: You know? And that's one of the things that I celebrate about Sierra. Because, you know, she's so curious to learn, and I think that's a beautiful thing, especially about someone who wants to get their PhD. You know, you have to be curious, and you have to be willing to learn.

Dr. Cole: She teaches me things, you know. She's so interested in understanding, and she'll say, “Okay, I found this,” or, “I learned this,” or, “I have a question about this.” And sometimes I'm like, “Well, I don't know. Let me see what I can find,” but we'll learn together. And it's just the fact that she's able to, one, trust me to shepherd her and her journey, and then, two, allow herself to even go to this area that is not defined in a textbook. You know, just out of her own interest, shows that she's able to think critically, and she's able to go back and rely on maybe the core skills that she, you know, was exposed to in the curriculum.

Amy: What interests you about homeopathic remedies?

Sierra: I think one of the main things I like is that there's not a lot of research out there, so in a way, I do feel like....

Amy: You're exploring something new.

Sierra: Yeah. It's new. It's cutting edge, and I really enjoy that. There's not a lot of precedence, and there should be because it's a growing field.

Dr. Cole: Yeah. A lot of the stuff that's out there, it's like, you know, mom and pop--age old remedies. So, you know, there is not actually real science that backs it. It's just a lot of positive testimony that supports it. And so, I think that that's, you know, where there's a lot of battle between traditional Chinese medicine and then like pharmaceutical medicine. Like you can find a lot of papers on that, and both entities would say it works, right? But then there's the how and

why, and you know, if this works in this way, can we maximize it, and isolate it, you know, and maybe make it into a specific drug?

Dr. Cole: And I think that if you can understand so many homeopathic remedies and so many botanical sources, then maybe you can create new drugs that, you know, are needed. Or even create medicines for people who can't take certain drugs right now. You know, uh, like, you know, when you talk about fetal pharmacology, and, and pregnancy women, and pregnant women. You know, so....

Amy: What would you consider a homeopathic remedy? Because I guess in my head, I'm thinking even the medicine that we take, it comes from some kind of natural source, you know? So, what exactly.... At what point does it become a homeopathic remedy? Or at what point does it not become one?

Dr. Cole: Okay. So, it.... Basically, when it's been isolated. Okay. So, if you think about caffeine, for example. Caffeine, you know, comes from a cocoa plant, and it's extracted, um, and it's concentrated basically where you can now put it synthetically.... Like you can synthesize it, or you can extract it and concentrate it and put in other things. So, I think that the natural perspective of it is like now you get the leaf that contains the caffeine, or the bean that contains the caffeine in it, and then you like eat that. And then you get immediate caffeine versus having it extracted and isolated and purified.

Dr. Cole: Even in coffee, for example, you have the caffeine that's in your coffee. But if you do some wet chemistry techniques, you can actually crash out the caffeine and isolate it from the coffee and actually have like crystallized caffeine. And so, in that case, when you have the crystallized caffeine where it's like a saltshaker of caffeine, then it's no longer like a botanical source, a homeopathic remedy per se. So, a lot of the homeopathic remedies have active ingredients in there, but they haven't actually been isolated to say this is the thing that's causing this effect.

Amy: Okay. So, is it like a mish mash of botanical sources?

Dr. Cole: Sometimes, yeah. So, you know, one perspective I guess would be thinking about like a tea bag where you have like leaves of all kinds of different things in there. Um, you know, some people might make salves, you know, uh, they may get leaves and put like a little water or oil on it and crush it. And then they get that oil liquid that comes from that, that extract, and put it on something else and then mix it with something else.

Dr. Cole: So, in a way, I guess if you're going straight like to the garden and plucking something and using something in its most natural form, then I guess in a way that would be more homeopathic. If you're getting something that's been synthesized or manufactured from a pharmaceutical company that you can buy as a clean, white, you know, purified compound, then that wouldn't be homeopathic. Both of them will accomplish maybe the same goal. The um, pharmaceutical route would obviously be more controlled because in that case you can say, I gave you one gram of this stuff. Whereas you might have eaten seven leaves and gotten 10 grams of something, you know. It's a little bit more risky, and the people who use traditional medicine, I think more so it's an art, and you have to be aware. You have to have someone that's more aware of like how much of something you can and can't use.

Amy: Sierra, what have you found in your research about homeopathic remedies? Why do people choose to use homeopathic remedies versus what's already out there?

Sierra: Well, I've learned that a lot of people turn to homeopathic remedies because they have some sort of maybe distrust for mainstream medicine. Um, also, a lot of women, and a lot of pregnant women, turn to alternative, um, I guess routes as far as maybe treating, um, morning sickness or just different things I guess that come with pregnancy, maybe.

Amy: For sure. Because they can't.... They're not allowed to take a lot of mainstream medicine.

Sierra: Yeah. So, a lot of, um, pregnant women do turn to homeopathic remedies and different like alternative routes. And as far as what I've found, I'm testing currently four. And two of them specifically are actually really, they work really well in fighting these gynecological infections.

Amy: So can these pregnant women be taking too much of a certain substance? Where it's actually dangerous, and it's not, you know, not just not helping them, but it's also causing harm?

Dr. Cole: Definitely. Yeah, there's, so like, you know, some pregnant women aren't allowed to drink like certain teas, you know, um, because it will induce labor. It'll start contractions. It'll, you know, change, uterine blood flow. You know, it's just almost as simple as like: if you're on heart medicine, you know, your doctor's like, you can't take, you know.... Don't eat grapefruit. You know, like grapefruit is like the don't eat, you know, fruit on the planet if you're on any kind of medicine. So, you know, just as a pregnant woman, you might say, "Oh yeah, I love tea. Like I can't have alcohol, I can't drink a lot of soda. I can't. So why can't I just drink this hibiscus tea? How come I just can't drink this" And because it can have stimulatory effects, you know. Um, there are a lot of people who will rely on lactation cookies, you know, to increase their breast milk production, and there's a side effect of having too much breast milk. But when you're pregnant, I mean, you can only literally take Tylenol and Benadryl and water. And that's all you got.

Amy: Wow. Yeah.

Dr. Cole: And then you have the problems with a lot of people don't consider, um, like the natural remedies as something they should tell their doctor. So, whenever they go to the doctor and the doctor asks them, you know, "Has anything changed in your medical history? Has anything changed," um, you know, "in prescriptions or something? Are you taking new medicines?" And they will say, "No, I'm not." But then they're not telling you they're taking cayenne fruit extract. Or they're not taking, you know, they're taking all these, you know, nature Valley vitamins or whatever, that have metabolism support or something, and not realizing that that could lead to preeclampsia. That can lead to high blood pressure. That can lead to edema.

Dr. Cole: You know, but I think in a way it also creates a safe space because when you're a parent, especially when you're expecting, it's nerve wracking because you can't just like open up a little latch door and look at the baby and it's like, "Oh yeah, you're doing good." You know, you just have to pray that.... Okay, you're eating like you're supposed to, and you know, your baby's growing like it's supposed to. It has all the things it needs. And you know, everything is intact accordingly. And when you find out at 40 weeks, then it's like, the next part is like, "How do I keep it alive?"

Amy: So how does Dr. Cole mentor you while you're accomplishing this paper or while you're researching?

Sierra: So I'm able to come by her office whenever. We can talk about weekly goals that we may have, different things that we want to do within the month. Just different, I guess sub goals we have within the main goal of finishing the capstone project. Definitely with her, I've become a lot more confident within the lab and she allows me to become a lot more independent in the lab.

Sierra: She's definitely hands on, and she makes sure that I get results, but she's not necessarily just like breathing over me all of the time because I know in grad school it won't necessarily be like that. It'll be, "Hey Sierra, I need you to do this. Go do it." And she's definitely there for help and for guidance, but she's definitely given me.... Like I'll say now, in January, I feel like I am more independent than I was in September or in October when I first started in the lab. So I feel like through her mentorship I was able to gain those skills to just naturally become more independent as I continue the capstone project.

Amy: Yeah, that makes sense. What do you have to say about her teaching style?

Sierra: I really like her teaching style. I had her for industrial chemistry. That was unfortunately, like the only class that I was able to take with Dr. Cole. But I remember she would have different speakers come in. And the first speaker came in and, um, they had some like job opportunities, too, available for some of us. And so, after that class period, the next class period, she told us about how we have to show that we want it in order.... Like she has the resources and she'll help us, but we have to meet her halfway. And I definitely think she was very straight forward about that. Like, and I think it was refreshing to just see her be very blunt about it because it was very true, and I know deep down she wanted to help all of us in the class. But she definitely said like we have to meet her halfway.

Sierra: Because I think overall the class was different for us. And it's one of those things where you don't grow if you're not uncomfortable. And the class was definitely a growing experience because we were put in different positions where we'd never been in before as chemists, and it was very shocking. Like, Oh wow. Like these are things we'd never been exposed to or these are things that we may not necessarily know how to do as well as we initially thought. But she definitely helped us kind of figure out where we are. And I think she's really good at that--gauging where each of her students are, and okay, like this is what we need to do. This is maybe a weak spot for you. Maybe you need to, you know, like focus on this, as far as like, um, I guess coursework or when we were doing experiments, just different things like that.

Amy: Can you give us a specific story of how Dr. Cole did that for you?

Sierra: As far as the mentorship? Or as far as just...

Dr. Cole: Like in the lab--the timed experiments? I don't know.

Sierra: Definitely the timed experiments. I am someone.... I like to move on my own time, and I'm very organized. And sometimes I can move really fast, and sometimes I can move really slow. And I feel like for me there's no in between. And definitely in the lab, um, whenever we would do certain experiments, I would move very slowly, partly because I didn't know exactly everything that was going on or maybe didn't know how to decipher everything. But I think she

definitely helped me as far as my time management because, it's like, if I'm going to be in grad school, or even if I do choose to go into industry, or if I choose to do grad school and then industry, or you know, research professionally, I have to be quick with how I expedite different experiments.

Sierra: So, she definitely helped me as far as time management because I remember we had one experiment, and I think it was supposed to take maybe 15 minutes. And I think the first time I did it, it took me over an hour, and she was like, "We can't do this." So, they became like timed experiments where it was like, "Okay, you have 15 minutes. When you pass the 15-minute mark, I'm docking points."

Amy: So how did you shrink that time?

Sierra: Um, I think part of it was being comfortable with what I was doing. And I think a lot of times if I saw something and I was like, "Oh, I don't really know what this means," but I think she was able to, I think come in, and say, "It's not that bad," or "It's not as bad as you...", like, "Let's just kind of stop and think about it." And I think she did that a lot in class where we would see something. We'd be like, "We have no idea what's going on," but we could break it down like, "Okay, well this is just being diluted," or "Okay, we're just like making this," if that makes sense.

Sierra: It's kinda funny that when I look at Spring 2019, whenever I took her class, and I was very rigid and, "Ooh, I don't know if I necessarily like this." And now with my capstone project, it has a lot of moving parts to it, and I've had to learn as I go. Like, oh, like how whenever I go in lab for a certain day, what all I can do that day. And being able to learn that, "Oh, I can, while this is filtering, I can measure this. While this is measuring, I can set up this." And I feel it's ironic that I think that quarter I would have been more overwhelmed with the idea of a project that was so multifaceted, but now I feel like....

Amy: You can handle it.

Sierra: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Yeah.

Amy: Dr. Cole, what is your goal as a mentor?

Dr. Cole: I think my goal is to boost confidence, um, break stereotypes, have people realize their potential beyond maybe what they thought it was. I want you to feel like anything that was pressed against you--that said you couldn't--I want you to know that you can. And I will champion you, and I will get you there if I can within my own means. But I feel like my legacy on this planet is more than my publications: it's the people I impact. Because if I'm able to touch Sierra's lives, life, or anybody else that is in my group or my students, they're going to touch other people's lives.

Dr. Cole: You know, because I think a lot of times, you know, we have a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps mentality. But sometimes the bootstraps might be short, and you just need somebody else to like grab it and put it in your hand for you sometimes and help you pull until you're strong enough to pull. It's like mentoring is just my way of breaking stereotypes. It's my way of touching the lives of other people, making them better, making other people that they touch better.

Dr. Cole: You know, I just try to be authentic and transparent to my students and tell them, “I’m not any better than you. Yeah. I’ve,” you know, “I got my PhD in chemistry.” You know, “I got my bachelor’s in chemistry. I have six international awards. I have developed methods for the sugar industry. I’ve done these things. Doesn’t make me any better than you,” you know, “Doesn’t mean that you can’t accomplish the things that I’ve done. You’re going to be great and whatever it is that you choose to do,” you know, “and I will help. I will champion you. I will be the only one rooting for you if that’s what I gotta do, but I will make sure that you feel like you’re fully capable.”

Dr. Cole: And you know, I learned, um, don’t move forward without taking the next legacy with you. And so whenever I go forward, I go with my arms outstretched. Like everybody’s getting collected. We can all win. If Sierra was to win, great! Like, cause we all won. Like, your win is my win. You know, I don’t have to have my name on it, or nothing like that. It’s just the fact that I was there to celebrate you. Like, I was present.

Sierra: Dr. Cole said something. And it’s funny because she said it, and one of her, um, I guess past mentees told me this, but: mentorship is contagious. And I think when I think about what all she’s been able to do in academia, I’m able to look at that option and be like, “That wouldn’t be that bad. I think I would actually want to do it.”

Amy: Sierra, do you have any last things you want to say? Or Marsha, do you have any questions for her?

Dr. Cole: I guess, Sierra, if you could tell your first-year self something that you know now, what would you tell yourself?

Sierra: I would tell myself, “It’s okay to make mistakes. You’re not too behind, or anything like that. You’re exactly where you need to be.” I think that’s something I really didn’t realize until a couple of months ago actually. But, uh, yeah, I’m exactly where I should be, and I guess I shouldn’t be scared of the future. I still have time to figure things out and learn and grow.

Amy: Well, thank you so much for being on the podcast. I really appreciate you both talking to me and I hope you have a good rest of your day.

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