When Christopher Blackwood (pictured, right) was growing up, his instincts told him that the grass just might be greener somewhere else. He and his mom lived in Harlem. She worked a lot. Trouble surrounded the young boy. Fortunately, so too did people with the power to help him create opportunities for his future. These people, Blackwood shared, laid the foundation for him to succeed. They also inspired him to help others do the same. Blackwood is equal parts scientist and mentor and credits this reality to those who helped him get where he is today.

A mentor throughout his high school and undergraduate careers, Blackwood wanted to continue to help others learn and grow while pursuing his doctorate at Cornell. He was instrumental in establishing the relationship between Cornell and the Saturday Science and Math Academy, a grassroots neighborhood initiative that runs science and math programs for minority students on Saturday mornings in Ithaca. He is also a frequent speaker for Project Lansing at the Residential Correctional facility in Lansing, N.Y., where he helps to prepare young women at the Lansing Residential Center for their future, through academic and intellectual growth. Finally, Blackwood is a frequent volunteer at Ithaca High School and Greater Ithaca Activities Center.

“People have helped me along the way,” said Blackwood, citing, for instance, those who organized college tours and made sure he was on the bus and his academic advisor, Dr. David Lin. “I would like to acknowledge Dr. David Lin as being a great mentor. He has provided a lab environment for me to grow as a scientist and to stay grounded, occasionally assisting me in establishing the relationships between Cornell and grassroots initiatives. I feel blessed to pursue a PhD at Cornell, to have the credentials to achieve these goals, to help others realize their goals and full potential, to speak up about the factors that are detrimental to success, and to use my research to potentially remedy destructive diseases. When I help students, as Dr. Lin has helped me, it keeps me grounded. It reminds me how important it is to have role models who look like you and have experienced similar life events.”

These experiences have also influenced Blackwood’s professional goals. Determined to pursue a career in academia, Blackwood expects that his diverse background will be an asset to future students who “need to see themselves.”

“As welcoming and nurturing as Cornell has been [in fact that is why he chose Cornell for doctorate study], it was difficult to make the transition to my PhD work because I couldn’t reach out to professors who looked like me,” said Blackwood. “I didn’t see myself, so I couldn’t envision myself as a research scientist. I want to fill this role for future students. I want to help diversify the tenure track professors at universities.”

Rather than waiting for professorial status, though, Blackwood’s commitment to serving underrepresented communities has already led him to Cornell’s Office of Minority Educational Affairs, with whom he has partnered to hire undergraduate minority students in his neurobiology lab.

One of the undergraduates Blackwood mentors is Alessandro Bailetti (pictured, left), a Peruvian-born immigrant, transfer student, and first-generation college student. With hard work, scholarship support, and experience in Blackwood’s lab, Bailetti recently earned a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship and will be pursuing a PhD in biomedical science at New York University in the fall.

“Chris has been a big part of my support system at Cornell,” said Bailetti. “He has been an example to follow. He has taught me to persevere and not to quit. He has been an important factor in many of my accomplishments. More importantly, he has helped me to understand the science behind our research.”

Blackwood is in his fifth year of his PhD work, looking at the implications of neurodegenerative disorders like Alzheimer’s disease. He and his team have discovered a protein that is important for regulating the process to make new neurons, which are important to learning and memory, motor function, and preventing dementia. Understanding how the brain produces neurons, Blackwood said, may be the key to developing therapeutic targets for treating people with diseases like Alzheimer’s.