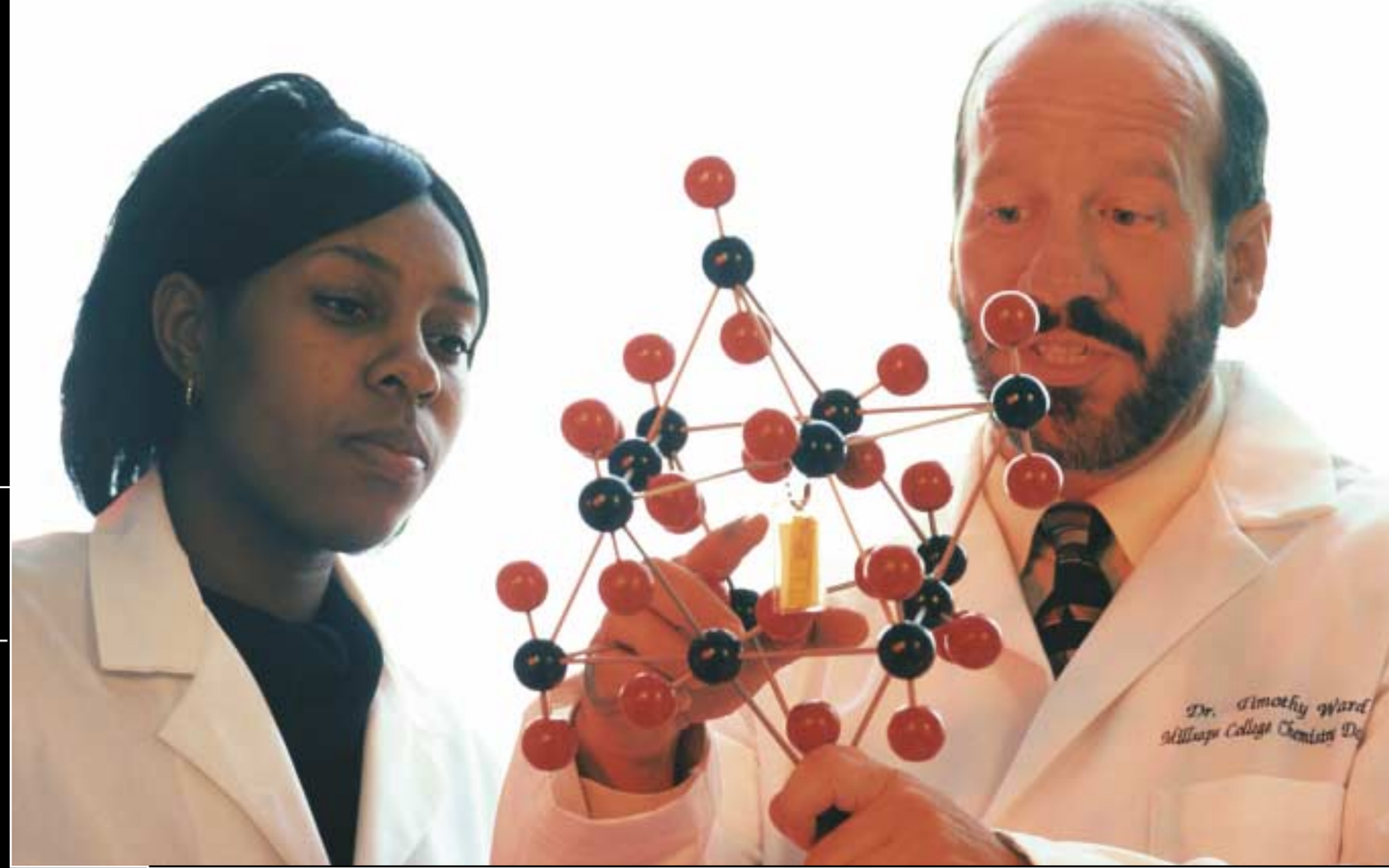
Meet Millsaps

Stacy Ponder and Timothy Ward

Good chemistry between a student and her mentor

by **John Webb**
photo by **Tom Roster**



When Hattiesburg native Stacy Ponder was considering pre-dental programs, Millsaps was not even on her short list. "Millsaps had been writing to me," she said, "but I disregarded it because I wanted to go to a big school."

But when Ponder was sifting through the college literature in her high school counselor's office, a Millsaps brochure caught her eye. "Then I had a friend tell me how well they prepared medical students," she said, "and how it was a small school where you could get to know the professors and you weren't just a number."

Thus was her mind opened to the possibility of choosing Millsaps, with its excellent record in seeing medical and dental students through a demanding curriculum. Millsaps, she learned, has an intimate environment where personal attention and accessible faculty could fortify her for graduate school. That Millsaps would cost thousands more than state universities was a concern, at first. "But my mother told me if Millsaps was where I wanted to go, then we'd make the sacrifices," Ponder said.

So she applied, was offered a scholarship, and chose to attend Millsaps, where Ponder, now a junior, says she has benefited from the rapport between students and faculty members.

Dr. Timothy Ward, chair of the chemistry department, has been an invaluable mentor, she said. "When I decided to be a chemistry major, I went to Dr. Ward, who advised me about my requirements," she said. "I told him I was interested in research, and he immediately signed me up." Ponder went on to assist Ward in a project pioneering the separation and identification of bacteria that cause infections. That project was awarded a $60,000 grant from the Merck/American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Beyond the lab, Ward remains sensitive to students' academic needs, Ponder said. "He always has time for me," she said.

"I was doing some qualitative analysis homework, and he asked me if I understood it," Ponder recalled. "I said no." Although Ward was busy preparing for a presentation at the time, she said, "he took time out to help me."

"One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is having the opportunity to develop students scholastically and as individuals, and to have the enjoyment of observing their confidence in themselves grow through the mentoring process," Ward said. "The educational advantage to Millsaps is the one-on-one relationship between students and teachers."

Ward's commitment to involving students in research has not gone unnoticed beyond the walls of Millsaps. In what is considered an extraordinary achievement for a professor in an undergraduate program, Ward received the 2002 Outstanding Contributions to Science Award from the Mississippi Academy of Sciences. This award is a testament not only to the excellence of Ward's teaching methods and contributions to research, but also to the scope of Millsaps' undergraduate research program.

"Dr. Ward has distinguished himself not only with a commitment to research but also by involving undergraduate students in that research," said Dr. Richard A. Smith, vice president and dean of the College. "He is giving them a level of experience usually found in graduate programs."

Ward has published more than 20 papers, many of which were co-written by undergraduate students. He is also the recipient of the 2001 Chemist of the Year Award for Mississippi from the American Chemical Society and has established a national reputation for research into the use of antibiotics to purify drugs so that they produce fewer side effects.

Meanwhile, following Ward's example of helping others, Ponder plans to use her knowledge to give back to the people of Mississippi. Ponder said she hoped to take advantage of a University of Mississippi Medical Center program that reimburses expenses in exchange for a two-year commitment by graduates to serving an underprivileged area of the state.

"I want to focus on minorities and oral health-care because there is such a lack of awareness and resources in that community," she said. "I want to stay close to home and serve my community in Mississippi."