Jeffrey Montague grew up “in the time of a segregated West Philadelphia,” he said, when during his teenage years, walking home with friends from a basketball tournament was viewed by police as just cause for a streetside strip-search. Not long after, Montague — a high school quarterback who was named all-Philadelphia Public League and nominated for the all-state team — was told by a math teacher that all he’d ever be was “a dumb jock.”

“When I’d earned my Master’s and had been accepted into an Ed.D program, I went back and saw that teacher,” Montague said. “I dropped all of my certificates and diplomas on his desk. I knew he didn’t remember me, but I wanted him to know that, for all of the wrong reasons, he inspired me.”

These seminal moments in Montague’s early years drove him to build a life and career that focused on encouraging students to aspire to great heights, especially when told by others their dreams were unreachable.

“Growing up where I did, and being who I am today, is personal gratification for having beaten the system,” he said. “I really believe the American educational system, in a way, fails people and it doesn’t matter what color you are. So I made it my job to give them hope, and hope might be all you have, but it’s a pretty powerful thing.”

Montague has multiple vehicles for delivering hope. The primary one is STHM’s Senior Professional Development Seminar, the one for which he’s best known. Montague developed the course, which is better known as Senior Seminar. The school’s capstone, required of all graduating seniors, provides the opportunity to experience a simulated small company environment. The class is operated just as a business would, with Montague and Rick Ridall, Assistant Professor and Director of Industry Relations, designating their students as president and CEO, among many other critical positions found in most corporations.

Montague has a special formula for selecting the ideal student for each role.

“I pick the kids who are fidgeting in their desks on their first day,” he said, grinning widely. “I look in their eyes, assess their confidence level, and determine that they’re scared to open their mouths. You can’t manage or lead professionally if you have fear. That’s why my class is a training ground for success. The students who fail at some things during Senior Seminar are the ones who show promise. You’re not supposed to succeed immediately, in my class or in life. It’s about failing now so you avoid similar mistakes later.”

Montague’s prophetic words fuel stories that continue to be passed down from student to student, class to class, year to year. Like the time he set a father straight, after meeting with the parent who had entered Montague’s office doggedly defending his son and had exited having finally heard both sides of the story. Or the time Montague made a student cry when he asked her to speak in front of the class. Or the time when he asked a student to get a haircut or take his hair out of cornrows if he wanted to be taken seriously.

Montague “has this mythical status about him,” said Jarvis Bailey, BS ’06, who has witnessed his mentor in action from the unique spectrum of both student and colleague. And Bailey, STHM’s Associate Director of Student Services, has a good idea why Montague is so revered.

“I’ve sat back all of these years and absorbed it all like a sponge,” Bailey said. “I have the same approach to students as he does. There’s a reason, too. The way he sits down with students who have a difficult living arrangement, or lack of financial support or support from their family — not only has he gone through it, but I’m amazed with how quickly students open their hearts and minds to him.

“Because of that, there’s this need to not let him down. That’s how I feel, and it’s certainly how the students feel. That’s how he coined, ‘Be the best.’”

Another of Montague’s catchphrases is even more ubiquitous. In his Speakman Hall office, just above his desk, he had hung a small banner that read, “I don’t make friends. I make alumni.” As STHM began to grow, in lockstep with his and Barber’s expectations for prospective students, he shared with a room of parents how a program aiming to be the nation’s best needs to recruit and enroll the nation’s best students. That’s why, he said, he can’t afford to go easy on his students.

“I started saying, ‘I don’t make friends...’ and one of the parents started clapping,” Montague said. “So from then on, the message stuck. I think parents want their kids to come to college and just