

# Know Your Wisconsin Mathematician

Interview with Rob Calcaterra, UW-Platteville, by Benjamin V.C. Collins



## **Where did you grow up?**

Brooklyn, New York. I went to Sheepshead Bay High School which is near Coney Island.

## **When did you decide that mathematics was what you wanted to do with your life?**

I really enjoyed mathematics both in undergraduate and graduate school, particularly abstract algebra. I was a teaching assistant as well in graduate school and enjoyed working with students. These experiences led me to a career in teaching undergraduate mathematics.

## **Where did you go to undergraduate and graduate school?**

I went to Brooklyn College for my undergraduate degree, and UW-Madison for my Ph.D.

## **What was the influence of your family on your education?**

Both of my parents received high school diplomas but neither attended college. They were supportive of their children going to college but really had no idea what one did in college. I think my mom would have preferred that I went to medical school because it was something she could relate to better. I was the first of my siblings to graduate high school so none of them were able to offer much guidance either. I had to rely on teachers and friends to find out about education and career options.

## **Are there any teachers who had influenced you to become a mathematician?**

There were primarily two teachers who piqued my interest in mathematics, David Bloom at Brooklyn College and Marty Isaacs at Madison.

## **How did you end up at UW-Platteville?**

When I finished graduate school at Madison, my wife was still working on her degree. Platteville was a convenient place to be while she finished her degree. Her family is also in the Madison area so staying here made sense.

## **What have your students meant to you as a teacher and mathematician?**

Interacting with students and my colleagues in the department is by far and away the best part of the job. I will miss these interactions when I retire.

## **What courses do you like to teach?**

I like to teach most of the courses offered by our program. I particularly enjoy the theory courses in abstract algebra and introductory analysis. I also like to work with students on their Senior Seminar projects.

## **How have you found that teaching of mathematics has changed over the years?**

The availability of technology has increased greatly. When I was in high school we used trig and log tables in our mathematics and science classes. As an undergraduate, I had to use a slide rule for computations in science classes and punch cards for computer programs. A calculator, PC, or laptop now makes that stuff obsolete. Also, governmental support for education has waned over time. When I completed graduate school, I was broke but I wasn't in debt. My younger colleagues have student loan debt that is staggering. The department has lost several promising young faculty

members who have decided to move to other professions that pay more than teaching to deal with their debt load.

**How have you been you involved with the MAA?**

I attend the annual sectional meetings and often give a talk at these meetings. I also submit solutions to problems posed in Mathematics Magazine. [In 2006, Rob was the MAA-Wisconsin Section's Distinguished Teaching Award winner. Typically, he didn't mention that in response to this question.]

**What is the worst part of teaching mathematics?**

Administrators. I am astounded by the proliferation of administrators on campus in the time I have been at this campus.

**How do you describe what you do when you are talking to somebody outside of mathematics?**

I've learned to not even try.

**What is your advice to college students?**

Enjoy your time in school. For me, it was one of the most personally fulfilling experiences of my life. You were able to focus on learning and growing.

Who is a Wisconsin Mathematician that you would like to know? Send suggestions for the next KYWM to Ben Collins, <a href="mailto:collinbe@uwplatt.edu">collinbe@uwplatt.edu</a> .
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