Know Your Wisconsin Mathematician

Interview with Professor Rick Poss, by John Koker

1. When do you remember becoming interested in mathematics?

I can remember "showing off" my counting ability to my future teachers even before I started grade school. I have enjoyed math all of my life.

2. Was there a teacher who encouraged or influenced you?

There were many! Fr. Martin Dusseau taught me that math was fun. Fr. Kevin Ryan taught me that I could handle difficult math. Fr. Thomas Ostdick and Dr. Rose Carney taught me that math could be exciting and challenging. John Homer introduced me to the MAA.

3. Was there a time in your life when you discovered that mathematics was what you wanted to do for a career?

Even in high school I felt that I would continue with math. When I started in college, I expected to be a high school teacher. By my sophomore year, I realized that I wouldn't be able to deal with students of high-school age, so I decided that I would teach at the college level.

4. Where were you born?

Aurora, IL

5. And your undergraduate school and major was? What about graduate school?

I attended St. Meinrad College for two years, then completed my math major at St. Procopius College (now Benedictine University). I received my doctorate from the University of Notre Dame.

6. How did you end up at St. Norbert College?

I was looking for a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, so I applied to just about every one of them. It helped that Cindy and I had friends living in Green Bay. I started teaching at St. Norbert College in 1970, right out of graduate school. I've enjoyed the school and it's feeling of community so much that I've never left!

7. When were you and Cindy married? And how about your children? When did they come along?

We were married in 1967. We celebrated our 40th anniversary this past August. Michelle was born in 1969; Ken was born in 1971. We have four grandsons, ages 9, 6, 5, and 3.

8. I know that students have been a big part of your career. Can you please talk about what students have meant to you as a teacher and mathematician?

Students are the whole reason for teaching! I love the daily interaction with the students and the opportunity to share with them my excitement about mathematics. I found my professional niche by working with students as advisor to the math club at St. Norbert College.

9. In general, it would be unfair to ask you to name your favorite student. However, who is your favorite student in the set of all students who received a Ph.D. from UW Milwaukee, taught 1 year at SUNY Potsdam, chaired the UW Oshkosh Mathematics Department for 6 years and is currently the Dean of the College of Letters and Science at UW Oshkosh?

John Koker is an especially memorable student. It's hard to pick other favorites. I'm proud of all of my former students, whether they went on to graduate school, went into high school teaching, went into some sort of business field, or chose any other career path.

10. As for your own professional career, what areas of mathematics did you study?

My dissertation is in formal logic. My current area of interest is helping undergraduates do research – in any area in which we might find an interesting problem.

11. What courses do you like to teach?

All of them! I've taught almost every mathematics course that St. Norbert College offers, from Basic Algebra, through Calculus, up to Complex Analysis. (I've taught 21 different courses, not including independent studies.) My current favorites are Set Theory and Calculus II.

12. For years students and mathematicians have traveled to St. Norbert for a Pi Mu Epsilon meeting. It has become a Wisconsin mathematics tradition. What has the success of this meeting meant to you.

Hosting this conference was not my idea. I had taken a bunch of students to a different regional conference, and on the way home, they said, "We could do this." So, we did! The reasons for whatever success the conference might enjoy are the faculty who give up their time to help students prepare presentations and then bring them to the conference and the students who come to share what they have learned. Without these students, there would be no conference. The satisfaction that I get from the conference is in seeing the excitement of students as they make new friends and share their love of mathematics.

13. Talk a little about your experience as president of Pi Mu Epsilon.

I was apprehensive and a bit terrified by the idea of being in charge of such an important and venerable organization. Some special memories are: realizing that I was the one who had to ask the NSA to continue its support for student speakers to the national conference; dealing with the change in the summer national meetings when the AMS decided to no longer participate; reaching out to Kappa Mu Epsilon, the other national honorary mathematics society; representing PME at the ceremonies honoring the USA IMO participants; and being the PME representative at the funeral of J. Sutherland Frame, who was the person most responsible (in my opinion) for the success of the organization. As President, I was gratified to discover the respect that other mathematical organizations have for PME.

14. What do you think is the best part of mathematics and being a mathematician? How about the worst part?

The best part of being a mathematician is having the ability to see the world in a way not open to non-mathematicians. I also like to see the fear in the eyes of people when I tell them that I'm a mathematician. (Just kidding!) The worst part is having so many people tell me that they were never any good at math, or that they always hated math. I hope that we can find some way to make the learning of mathematics less intimidating.

15. How would you describe what you do to someone outside your field?

I teach! I try to get students who enjoy math and do well in it to consider continuing with it. I try to help those who fear math or struggle with it to feel a bit better about it. In general, I try to get all students to increase their knowledge of and appreciation for mathematics. The more mathematics that our students know, the better prepared they will be for the increasingly complicated and technical world in which they live and will work.