Know Your Wisconsin Mathematician

Interview with Professor J. Sriskandarajah, by Benjamin V.C. Collins

Where did you grow up?
Colombo, which is the capital of Sri Lanka

Was there a time in your life when you discovered that mathematics was what you wanted to do?
In fact, it was my father who influenced me to pursue a degree in mathematics. I was the first in our family to attend college.

Where did you go to undergraduate school?
University of Sri Lanka, Colombo.

And what about graduate school?
First, I completed a postgraduate diploma in statistics and a M.S. in mathematics in Sri Lanka, and then another M.S. in applied statistics at the University of Delaware. I also took some graduate courses in Operations Research at the University of Rome, Italy and at, Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH.

What was the influence of your family on your education?
My parents valued higher education. My father particularly stressed the importance of mathematics, science and English to excel in life.

Are there any teachers who had influenced you to become a mathematician?
I will give credit to some dedicated teachers in my high school who taught me both basic and advanced math and definitely that had an impact on me.

How did you end up at Madison College?
I came to WI in 1985 to teach at UW-Richland. Our oldest son was impressed with the curriculum offered in the Madison high schools and that was one of the things that brought me to Madison in 2000.

The Madison College Math Club is amazingly active. What's your secret?
The success of this 12 year old club is the result of supportive faculty, interested students and the generosity of our sponsors. Not to mention, speakers who are willing to come year after year to talk to our students, faculty and the community. This is another reason.

What courses do you like to teach?
When I was in Richland Center, I enjoyed teaching differential equations and special topics during winter sessions. At Madison College, I'm happy to teach calculus and statistics.

Over the years, did you find that teaching of mathematics changed?
Yes. As you know, the use of technology has tremendously changed the way we teach mathematics. In addition, there are plenty of websites in mathematics that offer an abundance of information to faculty and students free of charge.

Where do you think mathematics is going?
The application of mathematics is everywhere from breaking secret codes or DNA sequencing to neuroscience. One cannot think of any scientific area which doesn't have the influence of basic to advanced mathematics.

How were you involved with the MAA over the years?
In the mid 80's I was introduced to the MAA and math competitions and math journals by Professor Norbert Kuenzi of UW-Oshkosh. I have served in the Question Selection Committee of the MAA-Wisconsin high school math competitions and as the site coordinator of the annual section meeting, once in Richland Center (1990) and again at the Madison College (2008). I have also served as its Chair in 2005. I take this opportunity to thank Professor Andrew Matchett of UW-La Crosse who has served as a mentor. I continue to serve as the State Director of the American Mathematics Competitions since 1998.

You've also been active with AMATYC. What is that like?
As the leading math organization for two year colleges, AMATYC emphasizes teaching. I am a regular contributor to their monthly publication.

What do you think is the best part of being a mathematician?
I take pride in helping students achieve their goals. It was also rewarding to see when students from all over the state attended and excelled in our math competitions such as "Who Wants To Be A Mathematician" sponsored by the AMS and our own "Who Wants To Be A Sudoku Master" or the "Face Off" for the middle school students sponsored by the UW-Oshkosh math faculty.

What was the worst part of teaching mathematics?
It is challenging to teach a group of under-prepared, uninterested, unmotivated students.

How would you describe what you did when you were talking to somebody outside of mathematics?
Well, I like to talk about the applications of mathematics, the history of mathematics and other branches of basic mathematics, such as the recreational mathematics, which not many students have heard of. I like to make an impression among non-mathematicians, that mathematics is not boring but could be entertaining and fun.

What of your work do you like the best?
In addition to teaching, I enjoy organizing math lectures, math competitions etc., which you will find on our math club web site: http://clubs.madisoncollege.edu/mathclub/

What are you most proud of?
Serving the mathematical community and the growth of our math club.

In its first 12 years, since its inception in 2000, our math club has hosted more than 100 monthly presentations by leading mathematicians from all over the nation, including some of the former Presidents of the MAA. In addition to several math competitions at high school and middle school levels as mentioned before, Pi day celebrations, birth anniversary of Euler, we have also organized two Math Musicals from area high schools.

I like to add, that I have received the Certificate of Meritorious Service award from the MAA at its joint conference with AMS held in Baltimore, MD in 1998. At Madison College, I have received the Outstanding Employee of the year 2004 and the Distinguished Teacher of the year 2005 award. I am also proud to mention that one of my former students placed ninth in the nation in the Student Math League 1990, sponsored by the AMATYC.

What is your advice to college students and new teachers?
Sometimes, it takes a little longer than expected to reach a certain goal, but do not get discouraged, nor frustrated, but keep working and you will be successful. To new teachers, in addition to discussing topics in the course and the use of technology, mention some history of mathematics, current advancement in the areas of mathematics, humor and some "mathemagics" to make the class interesting and entertaining.

Who is a Wisconsin Mathematician that you would like to know? Send suggestions for the next KYWM to Ben Collins, collinbe@uwplatt.edu .