

# Know Your Wisconsin Mathematician

Interview with **Prof. Rick Tufte** by Benjamin V.C. Collins

I think the first question on the minds of your friends in the MAA is: How is your health? [In 2003, Rick had surgery that removed most of a non-malignant brain tumor the size of a baseball.]

Well, the past month, I have been relatively good. I think I'm slowly getting better, but they say it's a slow process.

Where did you grow up?

My folks moved around quite a bit when I was young. So I lived in several little towns in North Dakota. Primarily Mott, North Dakota.

When did you first become interested in mathematics?

I guess in Junior High School. Probably long about grade 8 or so I started having a more serious interest in it. This was primarily because of a teacher who encouraged me, Homer Moeller.

Where did you go to undergraduate school?

The University of North Dakota, where I majored in math, with a minor in physics.

And what about graduate school?

First I went to University of Missouri, where I got a master's degree. Later, I got my Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I took a few years off. I got my Ph.D. in 1990.

That was after you came to UW-Platteville?

Yes.

How did you end up here?

Well, I was a T.A. down there in Columbia, when I was sitting at my desk one day. They had a great big room where all the T.A.'s hung out. One day, the chair of the department came in and he said, "Hey, there's a fellow here from the University of Wisconsin System, on a recruiting trip. If you're interested, he's in room such-and-such." So with that, I went over there, and eventually I ended up at UWP.

So what was UWP like back then?

Well, it hasn't changed a whole lot. The campus is pretty much the same way as it was then. Bjarne Ullsvik was Chancellor then.

You met Marilyn here in Platteville?

Yes. We met at the Dairy Days parade. Well, I'd seen her around campus before then, but that's where we had our first chance, and went out for lunch after the parade.

When were you married?

1972.

So what courses did you like to teach?

My favorite courses to teach were the courses in the calculus sequence, particularly the first one. That was primarily because of the students. You generally had very eager students there. They were showing up in college for the first time. They didn't have any preconceived ideas about what should be happening.

Over the years, did you find that teaching of mathematics changed?

I'd say the biggest change came when we started using handheld calculators. They really changed the way we taught. Of course, it was kind of a haphazard type of thing. Not everybody in the department used them in the same way. Maybe that's the only way it can be done.

How were you involved with the MAA over the years?

When I first came to Platteville, Norbert Kunzi from UW-Oshkosh came and talked to me and asked me if I'd be interested in running for one of the state offices of the MAA, I forget which one. That's how it started. Since then, I've served as chair and as governor.

What do you think is the best part of being a mathematician?

I can't think of anything else I'd rather do than teach mathematics. I was always primarily interested in teaching.

What was the worst part of teaching mathematics?

Probably student complaints that it was too much work. Primarily that occurred in the introductory classes, like College Algebra.

How would you describe what you did when you were talking to somebody outside of mathematics?

Well, you're familiar with the reaction that you get when you're at a faculty party and you tell someone you teach mathematics. Their first reaction is "Oh, I was never good at math."

So what would you say?

I usually say, "Well, I'm not very good, either. I always found that if I studied enough, it was something that I could understand."