Tell Us Your Story

People often ask me, “Ken, what is happening in the math department?” I like this question, especially when someone asks me at a meal or other occasion that does not permit easy escape. That is because I have a lot to say, and most of what I say involves the accomplishments of our students and alumni.

Among our alumni are teachers, actuaries, mathematicians, statisticians, physicians, and other successful people in many walks of life. I am proud of all of you, and I love telling your stories.

We have a talented group of students majoring in mathematics, and most of them are women! One of our seniors is already teaching at Walla Walla Valley Academy, and other majors are planning to become teachers. Another one of our majors, who is the AGA Girls’ Club president, plans to become a physician, and yet another plans to become an actuary.

As far as investments go, these students are a sure thing! Many of you already have made investments in our students through your scholarship gifts. We appreciate your partnership in this endeavor. Beyond financial support, your gifts demonstrate to our students the spirit of support and caring we hope to impart to them.

I invite you to our department reunion during Homecoming Weekend, April 25-28, 2013. At 6 p.m., on Sabbath, the Department of Mathematics will join the Department of Physics and the Department of Computer Science to host an alumni reunion.

If you can’t attend, please send me a note and keep us up-to-date on your activities and accomplishments.

Ken Wiggins, Chair
Department of Mathematics
Ken.wiggins@wallawalla.edu

Tom Thompson, longtime professor of mathematics at Walla Walla University, received the Mathematical Association of America’s Section Award for Distinguished College or University Teaching of Mathematics in the Pacific Northwest.

Such recognition is quite significant; the MAA has approximately 20,000 members nationwide, including about 800 in the Northwest, spread throughout five U.S. states and five Canadian provinces. Thompson was presented a certificate at Pacific Northwest sectional meeting held at the University of Portland in last April.

Thompson, who was the WWU Distinguished Faculty Lecturer in 2009, was nominated by Professor Ken Wiggins, chair of the Mathematics Department. Along with Wiggins’s initial nomination and supporting documentation, further letters of recommendation were sent in by a colleague, a university administrator, and recent graduate. Interestingly, all of these individuals were also former students of Thompson.

The award from the MAA “helps to put us on the map,” Thompson said. “Today, Christian education is not always an easy sell, especially considering the costs. For someone at WWU to be chosen is significant. This is a high honor for the university.”

The mathematics enthusiast and amateur astronomer also explained how the joy of being a teacher is not about receiving impressive awards, but rather in working with students.

“I really enjoy trying to hook students on a subject that many of them are required to take for another discipline,” he began.

“When you can toss out extra problems, some easy, and some more challenging, and get students of a wide variety of abilities to latch onto them, it really doesn’t get better than that!”

Thompson graduated from WWU and first began teaching in 1971, and later he received his doctorate from the University of California, Davis. Since then, he has made presentations around the world, including in Brazil and Poland. The book he published in 1984, “From Error Correcting Codes Through Sphere Packing to Simple Groups,” is now in its fifth printing with MAA, and his fundraising efforts were instrumental in acquiring the observatory on top of Kretschmar Hall.

Now in his 42nd year teaching at Walla Walla University, Thompson relishes each day like it is his first on the job. “I tell my students that I am so lucky,” he said. “Walla Walla is my alma mater and, quite frankly, I never expected to be back here. I get to do that which seems to suit me exactly. I wake up in the morning and look forward with relish to what I am privileged to do that day—teach mathematics, maybe even change attitudes.”
MATH FUN
This year’s Mathematics Club has been busy hosting fun activities for members, mathletes and mere mortals alike. Club members had fun getting lost in the local corn maze and enjoying treats from the much-loved Colville St. Patisserie. Current club president Becky Picard says this year’s activities will include service activities, sledding with the biology club, a photo scavenger hunt, and gatherings for home-made ice cream.

STAY CONNECTED
Check in with fellow math majors, see what our current students are doing, and receive WWU information. Find Walla Walla University on LinkedIn. Or, sign up for WWU’s alumni e-newsletter at wallawalla.edu/enewssignup.

WWU Mathematics: All In the Family

What does your family have in common? If you are the Foster family, you attended the same college, and you also graduated with the same major.

Meet the Fosters, all Walla Walla University alumni. Beverly Rippey Foster is a 1978 mathematics graduate. Her husband, James Foster, is a 1980 mathematics graduate.

Twenty-five years after they sat in the classrooms of Kretschmar Hall, their children, John and Laura, started their mathematics studies at Walla Walla.

Beverly’s family connections to Walla Walla began almost 100 years ago. Beverly’s grandfather, Edward Rippey, was a 1920 graduate. Her grandmother, Margaret Holden Rippey, graduated in 1914 with diploma in music, and in 1916 with bachelor of music degree.

Beverly’s father, 1950 graduate William Rippey, was a biology pre-med student at WWU. For Beverly, “I took it for granted that I would go to Walla Walla. The hard part was choosing a major.”

Mathematics has provided a successful professional foundation for Beverly and each of her family.

Beverly currently works as a human resources and payroll analyst for Digimarc Corporation in Beaverton, Ore., where she and her husband live. She also has taught mathematics at the college and junior high school level.

James is a software engineer for VMware. James also has a law degree and spent some years working as an attorney. His interest in politics led to his run as a Libertarian candidate a couple of political races, including a 2012 special election for a seat in the U.S. Congress for Oregon’s 1st congressional district.

John, a 2007 WWU graduate, is currently in the doctoral program at the University of Oregon where he is studying representations of quantum groups.

Laura, a 2008 WWU graduate completed medical studies at Loma Linda University, and is currently in a neurology residency at the University of Minnesota.

All four Fosters took classes from Tom Thompson, and valued the knowledge and the personalities of their mathematics professors. Although their academic experience has served the family well, for Beverly it was the caring nature of her mathematics professors that was most memorable. “The faculty went out of their way to make us part of the Walla Walla family, including being invited to their home,” Beverly says.

One particular experience conveyed to Beverly the caring qualities of her professors.

“When I was a student I worked as the department secretary. The back of my desk chair had broken off, but it wasn’t a big deal. I only worked a couple of hours a day and I was managing. The next day I came in and discovered that Gordon Hare [department head] had given me his chair and was using mine. To me that showed how much he cared for us students. He was truly a servant leader.”
Statistician Analyzes Medical Research Data

Broman's interest in statistics was sparked during her time as a student. Though she originally came to study engineering, Broman also joined the math program her junior year.

“Our professors are really interested in helping students understand the material,” she says. “And the smaller class sizes and friendly teachers were a good environment for me.”

Broman first heard about the field of statistics from a University of Oregon statistician, who gave a lecture at WWU.

“I wanted to work in a field that was more applied than mathematics, but not as hands-on as engineering,” she says. “Statisticians quantify the uncertainty of collected data, using mathematical principles.”

After graduation, Broman spent a year teaching English in Beijing, China, and then continued her education at the University of California-Berkeley, where she received a master’s degree in statistics.

Broman and her husband, Karl, have two children. In her spare time, she plays viola with the Edgewood Chamber Orchestra.

What does a mathematic major do?

Aimee Teo Broman works with medical researchers at a state university. She and her husband, Karl, have two children.

Academic Pursuits In Full Gear

These recent graduates have used their Walla Walla University mathematics studies as a springboard to the next level of academic excellence.

Sharif Ibrahim ’05 is working on a doctoral degree at Washington State University with WWU mathematics graduate Kevin Vixie ’84.

Jason Damazo ’07 is working on a doctoral degree in aeronautical engineering at California Institute of Technology.

Ross Magi ’07 is working on a doctoral degree in mathematical biology at the University of Utah.

Colin Clark ’07 is working on a doctoral degree in applied mathematics at University of Arizona.

Graham Vixie ’07 is working on a doctoral degree in physics at University of Idaho. (Vixie has also worked on the Casini spacecraft.)

John Hawkins ’10 is working on a doctoral degree in computational mathematics at University of Texas, Austin.

Anya Davis ’10 is studying physics at Washington State University.

WWU'S MATH TEAM

Ken Wiggins, Ph.D., Chair
Professor of Mathematics

Tom Thompson, Ph.D.
Professor of Mathematics

Tim Tiffin, DA
Professor of Mathematics

Jonathan Duncan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Mathematics

Heidi Haynal, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Mathematics

math.wallawalla.edu