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Pitney Tackles Summer Math

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Erin Pitney '03 (left) returned to Linfield this summer for a Research Experience for Teachers, funded by the National Science Foundation. She tackled graph theory research with Chuck Dunn and Jennifer Nordstrom, associate professors of math, and undergraduate research students.

Pitney tackles summer math

Erin Pitney's earliest math memory involves beans, and a bit of irritation.

"In the first grade we had to count beans up to 1,000 and then count back down," said Pitney '03. "I remember thinking, 'I get it already. Enough. I understand place value.'"

Luckily, the initial boredom did not squelch her mathematical excitement. She progressed to fraction bars and repeating decimals, basic algebra and geometry, then conjectures and theorems. This summer, she returned to Linfield College to tackle research in graph theory.

Pitney, a middle school math teacher, joined a team of six undergraduate researchers working on summer math projects at Linfield. Led by Chuck Dunn and Jennifer Nordstrom, both associate professors of math at Linfield, they participated in the National Science Foundation's Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) and Research Experiences for Teachers (RET). Linfield was one of four schools in the Willamette Valley Consortium for Mathematics Research hosting the eight-week program, in the third of a three-year NSF grant. They hope to renew the grant next year.

The high-level math is above the geometry and algebra II Pitney teaches at Meadow Park Middle School in Beaverton. But that's okay. Pitney's summer experience will benefit her students in other ways. She has a better understanding of math research and plans to translate that to her middle-schoolers.

"Now I have the resources to teach my students what a math science fair project at the middle school level looks like," she said.

Dunn said the summer program trains participants to ask and answer their own questions, and Nordstrom agrees.

"It's important to give teachers a broad research experience and see what they can take back to their classroom," added Nordstrom. "They're not taking a specific mathematics back to the classroom, but they're taking the process and mentoring young students to have a research experience."

As a Linfield student, Pitney took a number of classes from Dunn and Nordstrom and regularly studied in Math Alley, the Graf hallway lined with desks on one side and faculty offices on the other. Then, as now, professors welcomed questions and discussion, Pitney said.

Pitney is a firm believer in continuing education. In 2003, she was selected to participate in the Budapest Semesters in Mathematics program. Then, after graduating from Linfield with a degree in mathematics, she went on to earn MAT degree from Willamette University. She has also spent three summers attending the Oregon Mathematics Leadership Institute.

Linfield will be accepting applications in the spring for k-12 teachers to participate in the program. For more information, go to **www.willamette.edu/cla/math/ REU-RET/**. ∎

– Laura Davis