MY MATH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

KAREN SMITH

1983:
I graduated from a pretty good public high school in Holmdel, New Jersey, with about 200 students in my graduating class. I always liked math, and took all the hardest math classes in high school, including calculus my senior year. I took the AB calculus AP test and got a 5. I mostly got lucky with pretty good teachers. The only other AP class I took was physics; my school didn’t offer others. My favorite subjects are math and science.

My main math failure was in sixth grade. I, with about 10 other “advanced” sixth graders, was skipped ahead to seventh grade math. I sat in the back and couldn’t hear very well, and somehow wound up getting C’s. In hindsight, I guess I was intimidated and gave up too quickly; I should have asked for more help. Anyway, I was put back in a “regular” math class for seventh grade, which was fine, and got A’s in math for the rest of middle and high school.

Outside of school, I ran track (distance) and cross country. I also played field hockey one fall. I played in flute my high school band. I have two younger sisters.

I entered college in the engineering school, planning to major in EECS. In addition to Calc I, my first semester I took freshman physics, freshman chem, and the required freshman Shakespeare class.

Update 2015: I liked Calc I so much that I changed my major to math after freshman year. I had a few more “math failures” along the way, including some low grades in Linear Algebra, where I got a sympathy B- despite failing the final (the sympathy B- was because of a death in the family; it is probably safe to confess now that it is not unlikely that I would have failed even without that added issue in my life.) Still, I got a few As and A+’s too, and really liked my abstract algebra class.

Since I am now teaching linear algebra, let me assure you that, despite my complete and utter failure in linear algebra in college, I am now quite good at it and use it all the time in my own mathematical research! If you are wondering why someone like me, a math professor, could have possibly failed Math 217 at age 19, the answer is simple: I did not keep up with the assignments, assuming I’d get to them later, and I never asked for help when it started getting tough. I think this happens to a lot of college students. Don’t let it be you!

After graduating in 1987, I taught high school in New Jersey in a tough urban setting (Algebra II, Geometry and Calculus) before deciding to go back to school. I got a PhD in math from the University of Michigan in 1993 and have been doing research in abstract algebra and algebraic geometry and teaching math at all levels (from freshman to PhD candidates) ever since. In addition to UM, where I have been a professor since 1996, I have taught at Purdue University, MIT, and in Finland.

I have three kids: Sanelma (grade 12) and twins Helena and Tapio (grade 7) and a black cat named Klyde. I spend summers in Finland and speak Finnish, which I learned from my first husband who died of cancer in 2007. I just got remarried, believe it or not, to another Finnish guy, Kai Rajala, who is teaching Math 215 here at UM.