

It All Adds Up

To Sam Dittmer, math is more than homework or a series of puzzles, it is a rewarding and exciting part of his life. With great enthusiasm and no small amount of dedication, this young man has distinguished himself as a talented mathematician who sees his mathematical pursuits as way of taking on chaos and finding within it sense and order.

How did you first get interested in math? It was mostly just that I really liked it. I had an older brother who would give me fun problems to work on and advice on my high school math contests. Eventually I realized that there was a wealth of problems that I wanted to solve, not to win contests, but because they were interesting on their own merits.

What does it mean to be good at math? Often people assume it means that you multiply numbers really fast. They think you're some kind of super computer. Even though it is fun to play with that stuff, math, in its most abstract sense, is about pursuing truth. It involves a lot more creativity than I think people would realize.

Do you feel that practicing math has helped strengthen your testimony? Yes, specifically in regard to how I look at problems or questions.

To be able to work with one problem for hours or days, often making no visible progress for some time before a breakthrough, requires a sort of patient optimism which parallels how we seek spiritual growth. Rather than seeking for signs and wonders before we are willing to believe, we must first exercise faith, and know that signs follow those that believe. Instead of expecting all our prayers to be answered without us taking more thought than to ask, we must show patience and diligence as we strive to learn the will of the Lord. I do feel that math has given me a deeper understanding of that process.

Math can be pretty rigorous, especially when answers are slow in coming. How have you developed the discipline to keep at it? With math I never had too much of a problem being self-disciplined. But in my first semester of college I discovered a lot about being lazy in other areas. Being on my own was definitely an adjustment. In the end, self-discipline was something that just had to be done, a part of growing up. I just had to have clear in my mind what I wanted to do

Name: Sam Dittmer

Age: 19

Location: Zionsville, Indiana

Major accomplishments: First place in the individual round of the American Regions Math League competition. Sam also became Indiana's first Mr. Math in 2008. More recently, Sam's college math team participated in the six-hour-long William Lowell Putnam Mathematical Competition, coming in 23rd out of 405 teams.

and what kind of schedule I wanted to be on.

What is a valuable principle that you have learned from math? Hard work. One of the nice things about having a talent that you really enjoy is it helps you understand what it means to work hard. And there is the added fun of actually liking to do it.

Sam will soon be taking a break from math classes and will be learning even more about hard work as he serves in the Albania Tirana Mission.

—As told to Julia Woodbury