



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published June 1st, 2016

JM Students Shine in Annual Math Olympiad

By Sophie Braccini

There is no need to be a math genius to participate in Karlene Steelman's math competition class at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. This class provides a playful and different approach to solving math problems. And when it came to compete with 150,000 other students from all over the planet, the Moraga students did very well, with four of them ending in the top 10 percent and one in the top 2 percent of the annual Math Olympiad.

Enriched with this first years' experience, the students who are not off to high school math next year say they will take the elective class again.

Steeleman, who has been teaching math and science at the Moraga middle school for 10 years, was looking for a math enrichment class; something she would have loved to have as a kid, she says. She views the class as an opportunity for every student, an alternative where all abilities can flourish and learn from each other.

"This is an outlet for fun and interesting ideas," she says. "I do have some students struggling in math that I have seen blossom in this class."

The class works collaboratively on questions and thinks of different ways of answering them.

Steeleman says that she learns every day because the students think in different ways.

She gives the example of a problem where one person goes to a shoe store where the third pair is free when someone buys two pair. In the problem, the person invites a friend along because he needs only two pair. The question is, how should they share the savings? Steelman says that the most advanced math students will immediately go into equations, while others are going to wonder about the interaction between the two friends, who paid for the gas, and who provided the savings opportunity. For that question, Steelman says there could be tens of different right answers.

Noel Sel a seventh-grade student says that she chose this class because she likes solving puzzles and is interested in math. With Annika Johnson, an eighth grader she met in the class, they are among the few girls belonging to that group. They both say they have fun while learning to use different concepts in a different way to solve problems. "It was a cool experience to compete and try to get the best scores," adds Sel.

The math competition was an integral part of the class. Math Olympiad has been going on for 37 years for grades four to eight. It is an online competition that lasts five months, both for teams and individuals. Steelman noticed that her students struggled a bit at the beginning but got better as time went by.

Edward Lee, the student who placed in the top 2 percent, is a seventh grade student who has been doing the math competition since fourth grade. He too said he had fun in the class, as well as learned a wide variety of strategies to solve problems. His classmate, Cooper Schnurr also a seventh grader who placed in the top 10 percent, found it stimulating to try to solve problem as fast as possible. Cooper also enjoyed the teamwork in class and added that all level students had something to contribute.

Sam Morasch, who is in eighth grade, enjoyed going far and beyond what can be found in a normal math class. He said that the variety of problems was much wider, and triggered more creative ways of approaching them. All recommend incoming seventh and eighth graders take the elective.

Steeleman will propose math competition again next year as an elective class, as well as a separate engineering class.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA