

Bob Rapalje: The man who loves math

BY JOE HENDRICKS
EDITOR IN CHIEF

"I don't play golf and I never will. I like teaching math and I like solving math problems." These are the words of SCC math instructor Dr. Robert Rapalje. There are few things in life as grand as knowing one's purpose, living a life doing exactly what it is you were meant to do. Dr. Rapalje has accomplished such a feat. A young Bob Rapalje arrived at SCC in 1971. After 16 years at the Sanford/Lake Mary campus, Dr. Rapalje took up residence at the Hunt Club campus in 1987. On June 30th, 2007 the good doctor of mathematics will complete a 36 year run at SCC. If things go according to plans, Dr. Rapalje will reap the benefits of retirement as a state employee and return to SCC as an adjunct math instructor.

Given his love of math, it's hard to imagine Dr. Rapalje retired. One can easily envision him as an old man sitting at a computer, logged in as a tutor at algebra.com, smiling as he explains the beauty of the quadratic equation to a math student on the other side of the world. Dr. Rapalje discovered algebra.com when a recent Intermediate Algebra student mentioned the website as a possible late night resource for those in need of emergency math support. The struggling math student asked Dr. Rapalje to check the website for accuracy and legitimacy, unaware that this was the equivalent of turning a shopaholic loose at the mall with a brand new credit card.

After his initial visit to algebra.com, Dr. Rapalje wrote to the website's founder and offered his services as a volunteer tutor. With a new and never ending source of unanswered math questions, Dr. Rapalje was soon joking in class about the need to join A.A. (Algebra Anonymous) to get help with his math addiction. While some mathematicians prefer the company of other math wizards, Dr. Rapalje gets his biggest kick from helping the mathematically challenged. "I love seeing people succeed who never thought they could do it," Dr. Rapalje said. During his 34-year career at SCC, the good doctor has earned a reputation as the math teacher for students who struggle with algebra. "I tend to attract those kind of students, many of those students have been told to seek me out," Dr. Rapalje said. Using humor, anecdotes, and layman's terms, Dr. Rapalje brings a sense of fun to a subject matter that often frightens and frustrates stu-



Photo/Joe Hendricks

Dr. Robert Rapalje: Doing what he loves most...teaching math.

dents.

Former student Tom Bartheleme said, "I took Rapalje because I was told if you are mathematically challenged he is the guy to get you through. What I like is his 'can do' attitude. Dr. Rapalje always brought out my enthusiasm for math, which until then was well hidden."

SCC nursing student Ann Fitez recently completed Dr. Rapalje's Intermediate Algebra class. Fitez once struggled with math and withdrew from her first SCC math class. "I took Dr. Rapalje's Basic Algebra class and went from a W with another teacher to an A. Dr. Rapalje was highly recommended by friends and by the Basic Algebra teacher I withdrew from." Fitez will be taking Dr. Rapalje's College Algebra class in the fall.

Radiology student Quezia Diniz also turned to Dr. Rapalje to help her get through her required math classes. "I took Basic Algebra with a different teacher and got an F. I took Basic Algebra with Dr. Rapalje and got a B."

According to Dr. Rapalje, the only way to pass a math class is to do the work. There are no short cuts. Dr. Rapalje suggests that students set aside two hours a day, five days a week, if they want to succeed in Algebra. A quote found near the front of Dr. Rapalje's *One Step At A Time* text books echoes these thoughts: "Faith without works is dead." (James 2: 20). In other words, do the work.

Another quote from Dr. Rapalje's text books illustrates a teaching philosophy the good doctor adheres to: "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame, neither feel humiliated for you will not be disgraced." (Isaiah 54: 4). Dr. Rapalje said, "I have a commitment that I never want to embarrass anybody in class. If I ever do, they deserve a public apology. I don't think any

regret it later." New Direction's Ede Slovin, a friend of mine and a former student of Dr. Rapalje's, told me to "quit whining and suck it up." Ede once struggled to pass her math classes at SCC and claims she wouldn't have a degree had it not been for Dr. Rapalje.

I finally decided to go back to class. If nothing else, my first attempt at Intermediate Algebra would serve as the prep class I never took. If I flunked, I'd take it again in the fall. Chapter 3 was easier than Chapter 2. Square roots and the quadratic equations made sense. I increased the time I spent with the tutors and scored a 97 on the Chapter 3 exam.

Two tutors in particular, (Martin Gagne' and Shane Starr) helped me get over the hump; without them I don't think I would have passed. Martin is a native of Montreal, Canada. He recently completed his studies at SCC. In the fall he plans to return to Montreal to attend McGill University. Martin hopes to one day work as a nuclear physicist at the Council

teacher should ever embarrass someone in class. If there's a problem, they should talk in private."

During his time at SCC, Dr Rapalje has written three versions of his *One Step At A Time* text books, covering basic, intermediate and college algebra. "My goal was to write materials for Basic Algebra that would be easier for students to read and understand." Dr. Rapalje likens math to riding a bicycle: "In the first exercises of a particular skill, partial steps are provided to help students learn not only what to do, but where to do it on the page, like a parent, who after taking off the training wheels holds the bicycle while a child rides alone for the first time. As the student progresses, they eventually reach a point in a particular section where there are no more helpful hints; the student must work it out on their own-just as the parent must eventually let go of the bike after removing the training wheels."

Dr. Rapalje's Basic Algebra book was published in the late 1980's and revised in 2001. His College Algebra book debuted in 1992. Dr. Rapalje said, "In 1991-92, the math department selected a particularly difficult College Algebra textbook. In my spring College Algebra class I had only 10 of 25 students (40 percent) complete the course with a C or better." The low success rate inspired Dr. Rapalje to write his own College Algebra book. His student success rate leaped to 69 percent in Term I of the 1992-93 school year. For the next few terms, his success rate ranged from 70 to 80 percent. A few semesters exceeded the 80 percent success rate. In 1997 Dr. Rapalje completed his mathematical trilogy with the publication of *Intermediate Algebra: One Step At A Time*.

Last semester, Dr. Rapalje's textbooks sold for \$37--about \$40 less than the aver-

age algebra book. The no-frills text books are published by the SCC Print Shop. Proceeds from the book sales cover production costs and a small profit margin for the campus bookstores. By his own choosing, Dr. Rapalje makes nothing off his books. Instead, he asks that \$10 from each book sold be put toward the math scholarships he awards to deserving students at the end of each semester.

In his attempt to get math students to "see the light," Dr. Rapalje uses colored chalk when he demonstrates the solution to an equation in class. Different colors represent different steps of the solution. Picasso used paint and canvas to create his masterpieces, Bob Rapalje uses a chalkboard and colored chalk. While few consider math an art form, there is a certain sense of artistry on display when Dr. Rapalje works through a complex binomial-trinomial equation with the ease of a seasoned musician performing at an afternoon rehearsal.

Dr. Rapalje recently took his colored chalk idea online when he created a *Math In Living Color* section at his website (www2.scc-fl.edu/rrapalje). The section features multi-colored solutions for some of the more difficult problems in Dr. Rapalje's text books. Dr. Rapalje's website also provides practice tests and a Basic Algebra section for Intermediate students who need to review math skills previously learned and forgotten. The website also includes information on Dr. Rapalje's teaching career, a page of jokes and a photo of Dr. Rapalje and his beloved wife Martha.

As much as Dr. Rapalje loves math, he's quick to point out that math ranks third on his list of life priorities, behind God and family. Bob and Martha Rapalje have two sons, Rob and Philip.

Dr. Rapalje's internet presence also extends to RateMyProfessors.com. A recent post found there said, "Dr. Rapalje is the best teacher I ever had. He honestly wants his students to learn, and will go out of his way to help. I strive to be a teacher like him."

A future generation of math students would do well to follow in Dr. Rapalje's footsteps. The world can always use another good math teacher and someone needs to carry the torch of higher math for the non-math types when Bob Rapalje retires.

$$R^2 + MR = TL$$

Math... continued from page 7

journalism student, why did I even need algebra in the first place? How is that going to help me as a writer? I wondered if school was a waste of time. I skipped my next math class and didn't do any math homework. I considered pursuing an A.S. in Graphic Design to avoid more math classes. At one point I toyed with the idea of quitting school altogether, or coming back in the fall only to fulfill my obligations as the editor of *The Scribe*. Some may chuckle at my reaction, but anyone who has struggled in a required algebra class knows how mentally exhausting and stressful math can be. Math is brutal. I've seen it make people cry.

In my despair, I sought the advice of others. I heard horror stories of people taking the same math class two or three times, sometimes without ever passing. To me, that seemed like such a waste of time and money. Yet I also heard words of encouragement: "Don't give up, you'll

European Research Nuclear facility in Switzerland.

Shane, a former student of Dr. Rapalje's, earned a degree in Chemical Engineering at the University of Florida. After taking a position at Dupont Inc., in Austin, Texas, Shane realized that he didn't like being a chemical engineer. He returned to Florida and spent the summer tutoring at SCC. Shane is now in Gainesville in pursuit of a Masters Degree in Mathematics as he prepares for a career as a math teacher.

With momentum back on my side, I managed a 96 on the Chapter 5 exam. Graphing and domain problems were no big deal; I didn't even need help. To prepare for the final exam, and to say goodbye to Martin and Shane, I spent an afternoon with the tutors going over a practice version of what looked to be a very difficult final exam.

I needed a 47 on the final to pass the class. I got a 68. Not what I hoped for, but



Photos/Joe Hendricks

SCC Tutors Martin Gagne' (left) and Shane Starr

good enough to earn a B for the semester. My 4.0 GPA is down the toilet, but passing a class I almost dropped is a good consolation prize.

If you find yourself struggling in a math class, don't give up. Get as many test points as you can on the difficult sections and make up the points on the easier sections. Use the tutors. If you know math isn't your strong suit, get into one of Dr. Rapalje's classes. Do the math and take your lumps. In the end, it's worth it.

Riley: What I did for my summer vacation

The life of Riley

By: Maria Riley



"And think of the summers of the past
Adjust the bass and let the Alpine blast
Pop in a CD and let me run a rhyme
And put your car on cruise
And lay back
Cause this is summertime..."
~DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince~
"SummerTime"

The sun has tapped me on the shoulder for the last time to invite me to bask in its beauty one lazy day after another. It's August; time for school. Even in the midst of mourning freedom, thoughts of seeing old friends, making new ones and inching closer to a degree have inspired small trickles of excitement to grow. The ultimate dread that won't seem to dwindle, just like when I was younger, is being

asked about my summer vacation. What did I do all summer?

As a kid, the first week back to school forced butterflies to dance in my stomach nonstop. It should have been enough just to be present, enduring all the newness, exploring the unknown and finding a safe place among the crowds. But no, that was not enough. No matter the grade, no matter the age, without fail that first week back meant coming up with the best summer vacation story ever. Remember the paper everyone had to write? What pressure!

My parents were working class people with little money or time to spend on frivolous vacations. Don't get me wrong, we did take trips. These trips, however, always revolved around visiting family. Never did they include fancy hotels, Olympic-sized swimming pools, or learning how to speak a different language.

My little brother and I spent summers visiting grandparents that lived only minutes away from Myrtle Beach. We'd swim in the salty ocean waves and build sand castles that faded into the marshmallow white clouds above us.

At night, all of our cousins, aunts and uncles would gather around a large rusted out barrel that was host to many an oyster roast. Carolina beach music would always be humming in the background and I'd spot my mom dancing the shag, smiling

more than I'd seen her do all year long.

Cool sheets would float down to cover my warm sun-kissed body at bedtime and I'd drift off to sleep.

When we weren't beach bums, we'd visit my grandparents in Barnwell, South Carolina. They had a farm full of animals, fuzzy yellow baby chicks and floppy-eared rabbits that I helped feed. Bright yellow sunflowers, taller than my grandfather, would greet me each morning. I worked in the garden and planted seeds, waiting and watching each day as my butter beans and squash came to life, bursting through the dark black soil.

We walked down the street to the ballpark every night and ate hotdogs smothered in onions and mustard as we yelled for our favorite baseball players.

In the hot afternoons, the sweet sounds of a green watermelon being ripped in half made our mouths water. Sitting in the shade of an old pine tree, the pink juice would stain our tiny faces as we swatted bugs and laughed out loud. It was summer.

Each year I wrote about my adventures; each year my classmates became less impressed. They wrote about New York trips and camping all over the map. Many times I wished I could have had that one great story that held everyone's attention as I spoke of monuments, theme parks and foreign lands. When I was older I spent many summer vacations visiting amazing

places. I felt that it was important to take my daughter Jordan to see things like The Statue of Liberty. Jordan has traveled a lot, but the vacations she remembers best, and talks about most, are the ones that included family visits.

Jordan still laughs when she spots a thorn bush, remembering the time her Grandma Helen backed into one and amused everyone with her squeal. Jordan doesn't recall that it was during our stay in St. Augustine, or that we spent way too much money.

Every birthday Jordan talks about the two birthday parties she had the year we visited her Aunt Emilie--who surprised her with cake and presents weeks after her actual birthday. Jordan doesn't remember the long hours riding in the car; she only remembers feeling special.

So what did I do on this summer vacation? I spent lazy days with my daughter. We camped out in the living room watching old movies and eating popcorn. We had family Uno nights, playing cards all night long.

We painted our fingernails and toenails sparkling summer colors, like *Be A Star* and *Strawberry Electric*.

We enjoyed cook outs with friends. We read books. We talked. We laughed. It was summer.

So long and Thank You SCC

BY TOM BARTHELEMY
ROCKY MOUNTAIN CORRESPONDENT

Did you have a good summer? Did you get a chance to read any good books or listen to any good music? Might I recommend that you go see The White Stripes the next time they visit the Orlando area?

Having recently relocated to Denver, Colorado (a place I've called home before) I had the good fortune to attend two great concerts during my first week in Denver: Robert Plant and Phil Lesh & Friends.

Robert Plant is still going strong 25 years after Led Zeppelin called it quits. He's got a young band and played all my favorites! Phil Lesh, the original (and only) bass player for the Grateful Dead, has been touring with his side project Phil and Friends for many years. Phil still plays with The Dead--the post Jerry Garcia version of the mother of all jam bands. The Phil & Friends concert took place at Red Rocks--a natural work of geological art turned into a functioning amphitheater.

Our move to Denver came about much quicker than we anticipated, but our relocation went just fine. Before leaving Orlando I had to chase down a few Department Chairs and Instructors to get permission to finish my studies at SCC by taking on-line classes. My move was made easier with the help I received from the SCC counselors and the staff at the Hunt Club campus. I value my SCC experience and am sincerely grateful to the SCC Foundation for the help they provided.

I could go on and on about my 2 years at SCC, but for now I'll just touch upon a few instances. Ask my lovely wife about the first "D" I got on a test; a painful grade that prepared me for the "hang in there" grade that followed. Much thanks goes to my Algebra Professor (Dr. Rapolje) and my math tutor (thanks Carol!) It took all I had to give, but I did the required math. I'm not done with my math courses yet, but please allow me to savor a few moments of success.

Thanks also to those who tolerated my behavior in the CADD Lab--freaking out would be putting it mildly.

Thanks to Tony Ruggiero and all the Architecture/Construction instructors, lab staff and classmates. As a result of the education the Architecture/Design program provided I am now in a new area of the construction industry--a goal Tony, the staff and my classmates helped me achieve. Coming into the program I thought I knew it all; leaving, I found I wanted to know so much more.

Let me tell you a little bit about my trip out west. We left as soon as the moving truck pulled up. We left our trusty 18 year-old son behind to handle things. He will be staying in Florida to attend FAU, in Jupiter.

Our daughter will join us and start 7th grade in Colorado. A couple highlights of our trip were going to the Mississippi Delta region. I actually jammed on some blues with the son of blues legend Sonny Thomas. The cool thing is we heard about the Highway 61 blues museum on NPR radio the day before our arrival in the delta. It just another of those things that happen for a reason. We also went to Little Rock, Arkansas where former President Bill Clinton was in town speaking at a convention for Latin Americans. Last but not least was a trip to Eureka Springs, Arkansas and an awesome breakfast in Tulsa, Oklahoma at the Route 66 Diner.

Thanks to The Scribe for giving me the chance to write for a college newspaper. A special thanks to Joe the Editor, a kindred soul who shares my beliefs that Dylan still matters, that the works of Hunter S. Thompson and Jack Kerouac are still relevant.

And how about a bit of Hunter S. Thompson news? The groovy Johnny Depp is having a wake in Aspen Colorado for Thompson. At the wake, half of Hunter's ashes will be shot out of a cannon! People in the area are being advised

that if they happen to be having an outdoor meal that day they might get some extra seasoning on their meal!

I hope I was able to spread some joy, humor and good-feelings amongst my peers during my time at SCC. Those of you who know me put up with my bad jokes and frequent interruptions. I could continue naming names of friendly and caring people who helped me, but everyone at SCC involved with my education deserves some of the credit--pun intended.

It may be a long time before I stroll the halls of SCC but this will not be my last piece for *The Scribe*. I'll be sending occasional dispatches from our rocky mountain way. I leave SCC neither a valedictorian nor a genius but I sure enjoyed my experience. I now plan to pursue a Bachelor's Degree and possibly more...Why not, I'm only 47!

Do The Math

That Damn Column
by Joe Hendricks

After a stress filled spring semester, I looked forward to a summer spent playing band gigs, writing for *The Sanford Herald*, and learning more about Adobe Photoshop in my Digital Imaging class. Things took a turn for the worse when I found out that I needed to take Intermediate Algebra before I could take College Algebra or any of the other math classes needed to fulfill my math requirements. I hated the idea of a summer math class, but figured I might as well get it out of the way.


Word of mouth and a trip to RateMyProfessors.com led me to Dr. Rapolje's classroom on the Hunt Club campus. On the first day of class, Dr. Rapolje told us the work load would be heavy and we'd be wise to utilize the math resources at our disposal--free tutors, WebCT, Dr. Rapolje's website, study groups and the practice tests at the end of each chapter.

Things went well at first. I did the homework, paid a visit to the tutors at the Sanford/Lake Mary Academic Success Center, and scored an 84 on the first test. "Algebra isn't so bad," I said to myself.

And then we got to Chapter 2, which included factoring, complex fractions, lowest common denominators and exponents. My time at the Academic Success Center increased as the work got harder. For me, doing homework in the presence of a tutor was better than doing it at home. When I got stuck on a problem the tutors got me unstuck, so I could continue with my work and avoid the frustration of an unsolved problem.

I thought I was prepared for the Chapter 2 exam, but five minutes into it I realized I was in trouble. Everything looked strange and unfamiliar. I had no idea where to start or how to proceed. I gave up 15 minutes early and turned in a half completed test. I wound up getting a 49 on the test. Frustrated and aggravated, I considered dropping the class. I was a

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