

Oh, those mathematicians! They are the life of the party!

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Hard to imagine mathematicians being the life of the party, but two Alfred University mathematics students proved they could be with a presentation, "Mathematical Party Tricks to Amaze Your Friends," at the annual spring meeting of the Seaway Section of the Mathematical Association of America at Nazareth College in Rochester earlier this month. "We've all been to that party. You know. Lame music, awkward silences, completely devoid of the power of mathematics," wrote Michaela Stone and Michelle Zajac in the abstract describing their presentation. "Wouldn't it be amazing if someone at that party knew how to use number theory to predict the future, or could calculate square roots with one fold in a piece of paper? Give us 20 minutes, and that person could be you! Accessible to anyone who can subtract three-digit numbers, yet intriguing enough for seasoned Ph.D.s, this hands-on session will give you the tools you need to be the life of the party." The pitch worked. More than 50 people attended the session, said Joseph Petrillo, associate professor of mathematics in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Alfred University. "I am so proud of Michaela and Michelle for giving such a well-prepared and engaging presentation," he said, noting the attendance at their session was outstanding, considering it was offered concurrently with other sessions. "After attending my first mathematics conference at Clarkson University last fall, I came away feeling energized and inspired by the talks given by other students," said Stone. "While watching one of the talks at the Clarkson conference, Michelle and I both came to conclusion that 'We can do that!' Our main goal was to give a talk that was as entertaining as it was informative. Mathematics has a reputation for being a pretty dry topic, so we wanted to liven things up and share our enthusiasm for our field of study." On the whole, the conference was a very positive experience," Stone added. "I can't imagine a more effective way to gain exposure to a wide range of topics that were covered by the student and professional talks. It was also inspirational to interact with professional mathematicians outside of academia. Giving our talk was one of the most thrilling moments of my time at Alfred University. Seeing the room fill up with eager participants was a bit surreal and intimidating, but ultimately, we were able to engage the audience and give them new ways to share their own love of mathematics with others." Zajac agreed attending the conference "was not only fun, but also a great way to learn new concepts. My favorite part was learning about mathematical ideas I would not otherwise be exposed to. The motivation behind our talk was to encourage people to become inspired by mathematics." A course she took last fall in number theory "really inspired" her, "and I wanted to share that with others," Zajac added. A junior, Stone is a resident of Hornell, and is majoring in mathematics and education with a minor in music. Zajac is a junior majoring in mathematics and interdisciplinary art. She is a graduate of Whitesboro, NY, High School and is the daughter of Irene Zajac of Whitesboro and Paul Zajac of Marcy, NY. Stone, Zajac and Dalton Marsh, a junior mathematics major from Kennedy, NY, competed in a "Math Jeopardy" contest at the conference, and took third place. Marsh also found the conference to be a "great experience. I learned more about math and how the professional math world operates. It gave me a chance to become more acquainted with my classmates and my professors. I had a lot of fun and I hope to attend the next conference in the fall." Marsh is a graduate of Frewsburg Central School and is the son of Nathan and Christina Marsh of Kennedy, NY. Petrillo gave a talk on the Mathematics Division's new calculus project, "How to Turn Calculus Inside Out and Upside Down." He and Xiuhong Du, assistant professor of mathematics, accompanied the students to the conference.