

Walter E. Mientka

Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Executive Director Emeritus, MAA American Mathematics Competitions

Interviewed by Kenneth A. Ross

As a project for the upcoming centennial of the MAA, members of the history subcommittee of the MAA centennial committee have been interviewing prominent members of the mathematical community. The full interviews will be available on the MAA website; excerpts from selected interviews will appear in MAA FOCUS.

Walter Mientka served as AMC executive director for twenty-three years.

The excerpts here are based on interviews that took place February-March 2009 via email and telephone.

Kenneth A. Ross is a professor emeritus in the Mathematics Department at the University of Oregon.



When did you get interested in mathematics? What were the circumstances?

I became interested in mathematics in grade school as a consequence of my success on team competitions. One of the events, for example, required rapid response to the multiplication facts.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts, and attended Amherst Elementary, Junior High, and High School.

What did your parents do?

My father emigrated from Poland with his mother, father, and sister in 1904. He became a cobbler. At age 32, when I was 7, he went to the hospital for a “routine” operation. Unfortunately, he did not survive the operation, leaving me, my two brothers, and my sister to be brought up by our mother. She became a cook at the University of Massachusetts student health infirmary and cleaned the house and did laundry for an Amherst College professor.

Did your parents or siblings influence your interest in mathematics?

Not that I am aware. Our main focus as a family was to be accomplished students and to add to family income by working on farms (tobacco, potatoes, and onions) during the summer.

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Did you ever consider fields other than mathematics as a vocation?

Yes. I, in fact, was a chemistry major for two years but changed to mathematics mainly because I had difficulty completing my experiments in the two-hour allocated periods. I also pursued courses relating to nature study (zoology, botany, biological field studies, and entomology), an interest motivated by my Boy Scout training.

This additional training led me to become a nature counselor for nine summers at a two-month camp in Maine. This was a welcome change from the farm work, since I had difficulty with physical labor because I contracted polio at the age of 1.



Mientka, 1965

What was the special attraction of mathematics?

I believe that the sequential nature of its development and the problem-solving challenges were intriguing to me, especially the satisfaction of obtaining the solution to the problems.

Where were you an undergraduate?

University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMass, for short). The path to my enrollment at UMass was not without obstacle. The application required the recommendation of my high school principal. When I asked him if he would provide it, he said that he thought it best if I went to work on a farm (he knew I had to work on the farm during the summers).

This stunned me, since I ended with a high course average after completing a precollege program that consisted of two years of Latin, two years of French, four years of mathematics, four years of English, a year of physics, chemistry, and many social studies

courses. I had known while growing up that persons of non-English background were unfairly treated and classified. However, I never thought that my background would be used against me.

I informed my mother about the decision of the principal, and she was very disappointed. In fact, she expressed her disappointment to a professor at Amherst College during her weekly cleaning of his house. Soon thereafter the principal called me in and informed me that, following a visit from the professor, he decided that he would write a recommendation, provided I took another year of high school. Even though I was again personally disconsolate, I had no choice but to stay in high school one more year. The following year I was accepted at the university.

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My understanding is that you then went to Columbia University.

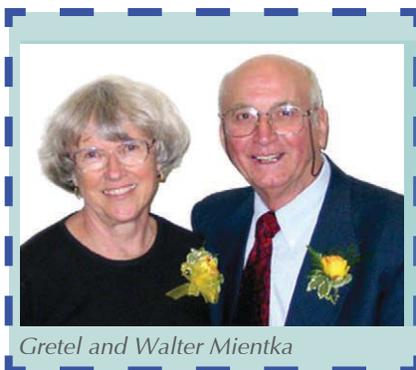
Yes. My goal of study at the University of Massachusetts was to become a mathematics teacher at a prep school. To do this, I knew I would have to have a master's degree. I was accepted at Columbia University, but I needed to earn my degree in nine months, since I only had \$1,500 to cover my tuition and dorm room.

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The funds I had for meals were minimal and just barely enough for me to get by. Near the end of the first semester, on a Friday, I visited with Professor [David Eugene] Smith, chair of the department, to ask him if there was any work that I could do for the department. He said he was sorry that none was available. He then asked if I would be interested in a problem that he received from Chicago. I said that I would be pleased to look at it. I worked on the problem throughout the weekend, and I was confident enough that I had solved it that I pre-

sented my solution to him on Monday morning. He looked at it and said it was very good.

I managed to pass all of my courses the first semester and was optimistic that I could do the same for the



Gretel and Walter Mientka

second. I was just about to accept a position at a prep school in Virginia when I received a call from the chair of the department at UMass asking me if I would like to return as an instructor. The offer and my acceptance of this position were certainly a turning point in my academic life. I realized that teaching at a university would fulfill a lifetime goal, and this would be my chance to achieve it.

During my second year at UMass I became close friends with one of the professors and one day asked him why I was extended an offer to become an instructor. His answer was: "What was the problem you solved at Columbia?"

During my third year as an instructor at UMass, I knew that if I were to be successful in academia, I had to have a Ph.D. degree. The question was where I should pursue this degree. During my undergraduate days I had read the poetry of Robert Frost and remembered a particular phrase from his "Mending Wall" poem, namely, "Good fences make good neighbors." Now, because of my local categorized experiences, I felt that it was necessary for me to "jump over the good fences" to seek a new environment. Consequently, I decided to apply for

graduate study at the University of Colorado.

I see that you got your Ph.D. with the famous number theorist [Sarvadaman D. S.] Chowla. How was that experience?

My arrival at Colorado coincided with that of Professor Chowla and his family. He had been at the University of Kansas following his stay at the Institute for Advanced Study. I was his first Ph.D. student. I shall forever appreciate his brilliance and kindness. Professor Burton Jones was also a special person and an excellent teacher and researcher.

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How did you get involved in the MAA?

I first became a member of the MAA in 1952 during my instructorship days at UMass. I became a member because of the "problems and solutions" sections of the [*American Mathematical*] *Monthly* and references to the MAA by the lecturers at the multiple-college seminars held at UMass, Mt. Holyoke, Smith, Amherst, and Williams.

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When did you go to the University of Nebraska?

I was in my first year as an assistant professor at the University of Nevada-Reno, and I really liked my colleagues and the emphasis on teaching and service. In fact I presented (by invitation) eighteen half-hour television programs on the Reno commercial station. I called the program "Fun with Figures." I began each program with a mathematical model (e.g., curves of constant width), then [had] a main topic such as probability, and ended each program with a problem of the week that I solved during the next program.

Why did I leave Nevada after only one year? Well, my wife, Gretel, and I

returned to her home in Boulder for Christmas (her father was chair of the CU psychology department, and her mother was a medical doctor for the CU student health facility). During the visit I visited with Professor Jones and indicated that I liked Nevada, but would perhaps someday like to become part of a larger department. A few weeks later I received a call from Professor William Leavitt, chair of the UNL department, who offered me an appointment. I followed five years of teaching at other universities with forty-five years at Nebraska.

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You've indicated that the University of Nebraska was very supportive of the American Mathematics Competitions. Do you want to elaborate on this?

When I took over as [AMC executive director], in addition to my department office, I was assigned one other office for the secretary. Because of the expansion of the program, I clearly needed more space. I was able to obtain space for our computer in the geology building. It soon became evident that more space was needed.

The only place available was our home. Three of our children had moved out, so the operation was transferred to two of our bedrooms. It was necessary to move our shrink-wrap machine home and arrange for computer modem hookup. For three

years we used our home, with the exams delivered to our garage, then into the house for processing, and then to the post office (our son had a pickup truck).

It was again evident that more space was needed. I was finally able to obtain a room in the recently remodeled geology building. This worked out for a while, but I was getting pressure to vacate the room. Our big break came after I invited the president of UNL to the Washington awards ceremony. He subsequently assigned us to a vacant building and paid for its remodeling. He was very pleased that the AMC was located at UNL and also pleased when he heard that the nephew of a member of the board of regents was honored in Washington as one of the USAMO [USA Mathematical Olympiad] finalists. Incidentally, the president paid for the heat, electricity, and air conditioning. I forgot to ask for payment for the water so it had to be paid out of AMC funds.

I am grateful for the overall support given to me by the University of Nebraska in general and to the Department of Mathematics in particular.

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What are your best memories of your work in the MAA/AMC?

- The expansion of the program; the success of our [International Mathematical Olympiad] teams; representing the USA at the International Mathematical Olympiads as an official observer and team leader.
- My appointment by Marcia Sward as the leader of the 1994 USA IMO team. This team ranked first out of sixty-nine participating countries at the IMO held in Hong Kong, July 8–20, 1994. It was the first team in the forty-nine-year

history of the competition to write all correct solutions to the six-question, nine-hour examination. I received outstanding assistance during the coordination of the team papers from Anne Hudson and Titu Andreescu. To date, no other team has ever scored perfect papers during subsequent IMOs.

- Making arrangements for our Hong Kong “Dream Team” and staff to meet with the [U.S.] secretary of education and Mrs. [Hillary] Clinton (President Clinton was not available) so that they could be recognized for their international accomplishment.
- Identifying through the examination process the first female participant selected for our IMO team. Melanie Wood was an outstanding IMO participant, a model for all to emulate.
- Meeting and working with outstanding students and teachers. The list of outstanding individuals who contributed to the success of the programs would include Nura Turner, Sam Greitzer, Murray Klamkin, Steve Maurer, Leo Schneider, Harold Reiter, George Berzsenyi, Dick Gibbs, Titu Andreescu, Ann Hudson, Donita Bowers, Cecil Rousseau, David Hankin, Noam Elkies, Dan Ullman, Mark Saul, Elgin Johnston, Gerald Bergum, Kiran Kedlaya, Joe Holbrook, Jeganathan Sriskandarajah, Wayne Roberts, Vince Schielack, Tatiana Shubin, and many more and all of the AMC regional examination coordinators (RECs). 🌍

Photos of AMC's early days and Mientka through the years is at the AMC site:
goo.gl/z1WDS