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Finding friendships and a deepened interest in numbers at math camp

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By Quinn Shanahan '21

Math is not my strong suit. Far from it, in fact. Until just recently, I never had any real interest in pursuing it any further than schooling requirements; it was just one of those places where I lacked the motivation to give my best.

And yet, I know what an important subject it is, despite its difficulty. It's an underlying factor in everything we do. Our education, our careers, and our futures have — and will — always involve some general knowledge of

mathematics.

This reasoning — and a sudden lapse of judgment brought on by impending exams — resulted in a questionable decision on my part. Sometime in April, nearing the end of middle school, Mr. Fitz [Gib Fitzpatrick], my algebra teacher, sent out an email to the eighth grade. It was one of those informational poster downloads about a summer math camp, [Girls Talk Math](#). The program was for high schoolers, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (seven hours!), on UNC's campus, for two weeks. Girls only, if you couldn't figure that out from its title. Such a camp demanded a lot of time out of our limited summers, but I applied anyway. I was curious about the concept of only girls working together to solve high-level math problems — it was intriguing.

So I applied, was accepted, decided to attend, etc., etc.

I found myself surrounded by 40 other high school girls. The plan was to split us all into groups of five. Each group would work on a college-level problem set, script and record a podcast about a famous female mathematician, and build a couple presentations for social media ... in teams.

I wouldn't be lying if I said I was a team player, but usually I do prefer independent work; no messy feelings, or tensions, or people being irritating. Maybe that was another reason I applied, to work on my teamwork skills.

To be fair, Katrine and Francesca (the awesome directors of Girls Talk Math), worked hard to put everyone in groups that would suit their interests. Groups were arranged into eight fields of mathematics: RSA Encryption Cryptography, Elliptic Curve Cryptography, Computational Dynamics, Network Sciences, Knot Theory, Classification of Surfaces, Special Relativity, and Quantum Mechanics. Lots of big words. By the end of camp, I had working definitions for ... most of them.

I signed myself up for RSA Encryption. You know: code-encrypting, code-breaking, code development. All the big internet secrets in the world? Yeah, the [RSA Encryption Algorithm](#) is the formula behind hiding all that





important stuff. That's the simple definition.

All that aside, the purpose behind writing this article was to bring attention to the teamwork and relationships between the campers at Girls Talk Math. There are always people who are completely infatuated with the idea of summer camp — the people who have a gazillion best friends at said summer camp,

who know all the counselors by name, who can recount every individual moment that took place over just a couple of weeks. It's impressive, actually. I, myself, am not one of those people. Summer camp can be fun and interesting, but I'm, more or less, introverted. I keep to myself, prefer only a few close friends as company, and don't go out of my way to introduce myself to new people.

First day at math camp, I knew absolutely no one. Zero. Nada. There were no DA classmates, no friends, no acquaintances. Such an environment doesn't really bode well for a girl who doesn't like strangers and is already nervous because she doesn't particularly love math.

This is where I found myself. You have to remember, there were 40 girls in this room. Which means we had to do some activities before separating into our respective problem set groups. These activities were mainly name games, little introductions and such.

And then we got to bungee jump Barbies. You read that right. Using a very large amount of rubber bands, groups of girls had to ... drop and suspend Barbies without having them touch the ground. It was during this time that I met several kind-of-strange, extraordinary girls. Eleanor and Olivia were among them. Two people I had never met in my life, both people who liked math quite a lot more than I did — we ended up bonding over dropping a Barbie off a bridge. When the counselors thought of this activity, I doubt they realized that it would end up standing for the metaphorical death of female stereotypes.

Eleanor and Olivia went on to introduce me to Denna and McKenna, who then introduced me to XT, Catherine and Tori. A whole network of friends resulted from a math camp. Not only did I find friends in these people, but I learned things about them: their interests in math, how they could all love it so overwhelmingly, why they worked so hard at it. I learned that they wanted their educations, their careers, their futures to revolve around complicated mathematics. It was probably one of the strangest times of my life; to have conversations with people who wanted to pursue something that was recognized by many people my age as unnecessary and difficult, who wanted to make differences in such an impressive area of expertise. As cliché as it sounds, it was an angle I had never actually looked at before.

And so these unique and spontaneous friendships, triggered by Barbies and rubber bands, evolved into something deeper. Not to sound even more cliché (I have absolutely no other way to word this, I promise), but it opened my eyes to new challenges — opportunities emerging from this initially scary idea of math. I didn't come out of this camp as a new breed of math genius, but I was no longer terrified by the idea of formulas, equations and numbers. While the personal relationships were the overarching reasons behind my change of heart, the camp itself was crucial to it all. I'm glad I could participate in it, maybe even a bit proud that I forced myself to attend, and I would recommend it to anyone interested — and not interested. I mean, really, what do you have to lose?

I didn't want this conclusion to be generic when I wrote it, to sound like every other "this changed my life" article. In the end, this program was — is — a

stepping stone. We hear enough every day about how we have to change the role of women in the present world — through math, and science, and technology. But you don't always get to be a part of that change. You don't always get to witness the stepping stones that women are climbing today to revise current "stereotypes." Girls Talk Math, the entire experience, seeing the girls who want to learn math, apply themselves to it, and the people striving to help them — represents a metaphorical death for the "Barbie" stereotypes we are trying so hard to break away from.

Above all, thank you to Mr. Fitz for sharing Girls Talk Math with me in the first place, and giving me the opportunity to attend the program.

The Girls Talk Math blog: <https://girlstalkmath.com>.



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