

MIT: Describe the world you come from, for example your family, clubs, school, community, city, or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations?

I've got it: $5\sqrt{2}$ over 3. I lift my head with a feeling of satisfaction and notice the crowd of parents gathering at the door. Glancing at my watch, I see that it is already 8:05. We've run over again, but a quick sweep of the room shows that no one else has noticed. I'd love to stay here all night, but most of us have to wake up for school tomorrow before dawn and there's a good chance some people still need to finish their homework for the weekend. Besides, two of our families live an hour away. The parents appear to be waiting patiently, but I know we shouldn't hold them any longer. Quickly, I bustle about the room picking up scattered candy wrappers, napkins, and cups, as much to alert the group that it is time to go as to clean up.

So we conclude another evening of Albany Area Math Circle (AAMC). I joined AAMC three years ago as a bright-eyed freshman, but barely able to solve even the most elementary problems. I learned a lot that year from the older, more experienced members who I was delighted to find were willing, and even eager, to share their knowledge with me. Things changed in the following years as I quickly became one of the more knowledgeable and experienced members myself, but the spirit of our Sunday evenings has remained.

Our Sundays always start with the same routine. We gather five to ten minutes before five o'clock, "because traffic wasn't as bad as expected" we say, but somehow that happens every week. After a brief sprightly session in which we catch up on each others' lives, we sit down and begin to work on the math. We work on past years' competitions, but we're not competitive with each other during this phase of the evening. Rather, we work alone, side by side, engrossed in our own separate spheres. However, there's something almost enchanted about the atmosphere that makes the experience quite different than had we done the same individually in our own homes, amidst the same silence. After an hour and a half, the spell is broken as a parent will walk in with pizza, our dinner for the evening. We're always starving by this point, but still slow to get up and grab for the food. There's always one more problem we want to get to first.

After we break for pizza, the room is absolutely charged. We write up our answers on the board and then discuss the problems on which we disagree, and work together to solve the ones that have yet to be answered. During this period, members also take turns asking each other for assistance on problems that only one or a few have solved and that the others have struggled with. This is my favorite part of the evening because I've found there is much to be learned from both the asking and the explaining.

I gather the girls in my carpool and we walk outside across the campus. The wind is harsh, there is snow on the ground, and my father said to expect sub-zero temperatures when we got out. However, I barely notice the cold. My heart is still back in the classroom and my mind is still on that problem we never solved. AAMC is done for the evening, but I still have the problems and many of the members' email addresses to carry me over until next Sunday.