

# MAA Mathfest Held in Atlanta

The summer of 1996 was witness to a sad occasion—the last regularly scheduled AMS summer meeting, held in Seattle. The sadness was a little hard to perceive between sips of the legendary Seattle cappuccinos and the cracking of Dungeness crab legs, but it was there nonetheless. However, those who appreciate this kind of nonspecialized meeting were happy this year to attend the MAA Mathfest, held in Atlanta August 1–4. Atlanta in August—not only can you fry an egg on the sidewalk, you can poach it, as they say. But even the weather cooperated on these few unseasonably cool days, as 850 participants turned out to hear a wonderful selection of talks and to visit with their colleagues.

“I found the Mathfest an exemplary showcase of how to make mathematics interesting,” said Frank Morgan of Williams College. “Ron Graham gave relatively simple combinatorial problems equivalent to the twin prime conjecture, the four color theorem, and the Riemann hypothesis. Denis Weaire described his counterexample to the Kelvin Conjecture with entertaining history and humor. Dave Witte used analogy and utter clarity to make the topic of superrigid subgroups understandable.”

Morgan also found a Special Session talk about minimal surfaces by Helen Moore to be captivating. Moore spoke in a session on research sponsored by Project NExT, which is a program to help young mathematics faculty members get their research and teaching careers under way. With about 125 Project NExT fellows in attendance, the meeting had a larger number of young people than usual, leading John B. Conway of the University of

Tennessee to remark that this was the “most youthful” meeting he could remember. Elizabeth Allman, a NExT fellow from the University of North Carolina, Asheville, was glad to meet up with the other second-year NExT fellows with whom she had been communicating by e-mail during the school year. “Last year in Seattle it seemed that the new Project NExT fellows were green and untested teachers,” she remarked. “This year the crowd seemed seasoned, competent, and still very excited about teaching.” Allman also found the Short Course on epidemiology “very interesting and informative.”

In addition to the Project NExT fellows, there were over 80 undergraduates presenting papers and a smattering of high-schoolers wearing “Math Camp” T-shirts. “Such a strong turnout of younger mathematicians must bode well for the future of the MAA and mathematics,” remarked Dana Mackenzie, a mathematician who is launching a career as a science writer, “but one has to wonder if the AMS is missing a chance to introduce these mathematicians to its activities.” He noted that for years the American Physical Society and the American Association of Physics Teachers had joint winter meetings, but no longer do. The reasons are similar to the reasons for the AMS pull-out from summer meetings: increased specialization and decreased money for travel, which forces

---

*“I found the  
Mathfest an  
exemplary  
showcase of  
how to make  
mathematics  
interesting.”*

---

researchers to choose meetings directly related to their work.

AMS Associate Executive Director James Maxwell attended the meeting, not on AMS business, but simply as a regular participant. Without any administrative or governance obligations, he could just attend talks, visit with colleagues, “and catch up on a little professional gossip.” “I especially enjoyed Elliott Lieb’s Hedrick Lectures on the stability of matter,” Maxwell said. “I felt he did an excellent job of exposition, and, judging from the reaction of the audience, others agreed.” Lieb, who is from Princeton University, called his audience “extremely warm and receptive.” “It was a pleasure giving these lectures, because I felt people were trying to listen,” he remarked. “The material was not especially easy, and there were three lectures in all. This is not easy to sustain, but the MAA members seemed to have made a real effort.” He also praised the MAA organizers and officers for smoothly running the meeting.

Next summer, with ICM98 taking place, many mathematicians are planning to be in Berlin, Germany, in August. The MAA currently plans to hold Mathfest98 jointly with the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics in Toronto in mid-July. As a special event for World Mathematical Year 2000, the AMS is planning a meeting for August 2000. Otherwise, the AMS is out of the business of summer meetings, but the MAA is continuing to carry the banner with a great deal of success.

— *Allyn Jackson*