
Inside the AMS

AMS Establishes Robbins Prize

David P. Robbins had a long, varied, and productive career in mathematics. His many friends describe him as magnanimous, hard-working, unpretentious, brilliant, and possessed of a rare ability to explain his insights clearly. David died of cancer in September 2003 at the age of 61. To honor his memory, the family of David Robbins has given the AMS funds sufficient to support a prize honoring the author or authors of a paper reporting on novel research in algebra, combinatorics, or discrete mathematics. The paper should be on a topic that is broadly accessible and provides a simple statement of the problem and clear exposition of the work. The \$5,000 prize, to be awarded every third year, will be given for the first time in 2007. A parallel prize will be awarded by the Mathematical Association of America, for which papers will be judged on quality of research, clarity of exposition, and accessibility to undergraduates.

David P. Robbins received a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then taught for a total of ten years at the Fieldston School in New York City; Phillips Exeter Academy; Hamilton College in Clinton, New York; and Washington and Lee University in Virginia (1978-81). While at Phillips Exeter, he collaborated with Richard Brown, a colleague there, on a high school math text called *Advanced Mathematics, an Introductory Course*, published in 1975 by Houghton Mifflin. The editorial adviser on the textbook was Andrew Gleason, who was David's adviser when he was an undergraduate math major at Harvard.

He then had a 24-year career on the research staff at the Institute for Defense Analyses—Center for Communications Research (IDA-CCR) in Princeton. He exhibited extraordinary creativity and brilliance in his classified work, while also finding time to make major contributions in combinatorics, notably to the proof of the Macdonald Conjecture and to the discovery of conjectural relationships between plane partitions and alternating sign matrices. For more information, see his 1991 paper in the *Mathematical Intelligencer*, “The story of 1, 2, 7, 42, 429,

7436, ...” or “How the Alternating Sign Matrix Conjecture Was Solved” by David Bressoud and James Propp in the June/July 1999 issue of the *Notices*.

David lived in Princeton, where he settled in about 1981, and served for a number of years as a member and then president of the Princeton school board.

Working on (and, especially, collaborating on) mathematics gave him enormous pleasure and fulfillment, and he had some 82 different coauthors. As reported in “Dying Mathematician Spends Last Days on Area of Polygon” in the *Wall Street Journal* on July 29, 2003: “He reacted to the news [of the cancer diagnosis] by considering his options: He could stick to his normal work routine at a government research institute. He could search desperately for a cure for his disease, even though his doctors told him the cancer is inoperable. He could go home and wait to die. Or he could finally get around to a math problem that has been bugging him for decades.” He chose the last option and his last mathematical efforts with his “pals” led to a generalization of Heron’s formula, answering a question that had intrigued David since childhood.

The prizes established in David’s memory will, we hope, keep his name alive in the mathematics community, and also help support the kind of writing he would enjoy.

—Joe Buhler, *Reed College*,
Ronald Graham, *University of California at San Diego*,
Ann Watkins, *California State University at Northridge*

Editor's Note: This article is a slightly edited version of an article that originally appeared on MAA Online, <http://www.maa.org/>.