An Interview with Ruth Charney

Scott Hershberger

Every other year, when a new AMS president takes office, the Notices publishes interviews with the outgoing and incoming presidents. Ruth Charney’s two-year term as president will end on January 31, 2023. Charney is the Theodore and Evelyn Berenson Professor of Mathematics at Brandeis University. Notices contributing writer Scott Hershberger spoke with her in June 2022. An edited version of that interview follows.

**Notices:** What are you most proud of from your term as president?

**Charney:** This has been a very challenging few years for the AMS, as well as the community as a whole, as a result of COVID, political controversy, and international conflicts. Much of my energy has been focused on navigating those challenges and getting people to work together in a productive way.

One place I feel I have made real progress is in bringing more diverse voices into the AMS. A major job of the president is to find volunteers to serve on AMS committees. The AMS has over 100 committees, and for a fair number of these, it’s the purview of the president to appoint people to serve on them. One of the first steps we needed to take in addressing diversity issues was to make sure that the people serving on these committees represented a larger segment of the community. We have a Committee on Committees that helps the president generate names of potential candidates, and they’ve been fabulous. I’ve also been soliciting suggestions from many other sources for new people we might engage—young people and people from parts of the community we don’t usually reach out to—and making sure that our committees have a nice balance between people with prior experience with the AMS and new voices. I feel like we’ve been pretty successful with that.

**Notices:** What did you hope to see happen during your term as president that didn’t pan out?

Figure 1. Ruth Charney is the outgoing AMS president.

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Charney: There are certain aspects of AMS governance that are a little klutzy, and I hoped to find a way to make things more efficient. Many good ideas emerge from the policy committees, but they take a multi-layer process to implement. We are considering changing the timing of meetings or having some remote meetings to try to make the process more efficient. I don’t think this is something that people outside the governance structure see, but it can be difficult and frustrating at times. Of course, whatever it is one wants to do—and I’m saying this more generally, not just about the AMS—it always takes longer and is harder than one would like!

Notices: The Task Force on Understanding and Documenting the Historical Role of the AMS in Racial Discrimination released its report at the beginning of your term as president. What do you think has been the most important result of it so far?

Charney: I would say that the most important outcomes of the Task Force report so far have been the creation of a new Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion staff position and the hiring of Dr. Leona Harris for this position; progress toward including more diverse voices in our committees, as we discussed earlier; and publicizing the expertise of mathematicians of color through books, Notices articles, invited lectures, etc.

The AMS also created a new top-level policy committee, the Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. While this committee was created independently of the Task Force, one of its main missions is to keep track of the progress being made on the Task Force recommendations and to report on this progress to the Council each year. It is important that we don’t allow ourselves to stop paying attention to these issues, that we keep going and take the next step and the next step after that. I’m optimistic that the new staff position together with this new policy committee will assure that EDI is a continuing priority for the AMS.

Notices: What have you learned about the AMS and the math community during your time as president?

Charney: The more I get involved with the AMS, the more impressed I am with the range and the impact of the society’s activities. I really believe that the AMS is an essential pillar of the mathematics community, and it deserves people’s appreciation and support.

For example, I think one of the most important things that the AMS does is government advocacy. We have an office in Washington, and our Director of Government Relations, Dr. Karen Saxe, talks to congressional members and staff frequently about issues relating to the math and science communities, making sure mathematics—including theoretical research mathematics—stays front and center in funding initiatives.

I’ve also become more aware of the breadth of viewpoints and concerns across the math community—people think in all different ways and have different priorities. That’s part of what I find fascinating about doing these kinds of jobs. I get to know so many new people beyond my usual cohort of topologists and geometric group theorists (whom, of course, I like very much).

Notices: You led during a time of worsening discourse in society in general, and even in the math community in some ways. How did that affect your approach?

Charney: It seems that whatever you do or say these days, somebody is angry about it. I’m the sort of person who wants to keep everybody happy. Well, it turns out that’s not possible in this environment, and that’s been frustrating for me.

I realized early on that it was going to be really important to listen to other people. With respect to diversity issues, I originally said to myself, “Oh, I went through this with bringing more females into the math community. I was president of the Association for Women in Mathematics, and I know how to do this.” But I quickly became aware that
the problems we face currently are just not the same. There are some aspects that are similar, but the more I listened to people’s experiences, the more I realized that I didn’t really know what the answers were, or even, in some cases, what the problems were.

While it’s difficult to listen to people’s anger, it’s important to understand what it is that’s upsetting them. That’s been a learning process.

**Notices:** How do you view the AMS’s relationships with other professional societies in math?

**Charney:** We’ve been strengthening our interactions with other mathematics societies in recent years. We have worked with multiple societies to redesign meetings and institute new professional development programs. I hope that we continue to build on those relationships. Each society has its role to play and represents a certain aspect of the community, and that’s wonderful—but it is also important that we work together toward advancing the profession.

**Notices:** The 2022 International Congress of Mathematicians was originally planned to be held in Russia—a very controversial choice from the start due to Russia’s human rights abuses. What lessons should the AMS and the entire math community draw from this situation?

**Charney:** It is really not the AMS who makes these decisions. That’s the job of the International Mathematical Union. Of course, we’re in touch with the people who are involved, and we can express opinions, but it’s not up to us to make the decisions.

There’s a somewhat related question about meetings we hold in the US: Should the AMS hold meetings in locations that either historically or currently are not welcoming to certain communities? This is a complicated question that is currently under discussion by the AMS policy committees. Regardless of the outcome of these discussions, the AMS is working to assure a welcoming environment at all our meetings.

**Notices:** What are your thoughts on the direction in which mathematics is going?

**Charney:** I feel that there’s a growing appreciation in the general public for the importance of mathematics in many different aspects of science and society. It’s no longer viewed as a highly specialized, isolated field. We used to talk about pure math and applied math. In my opinion, the word “pure” is a poor choice. It suggests that we’ve got a wall around us. A better way to think of it is as theoretical and applied math, and the two merge into each other. The theoretical feeds into the applied, and the applied feeds back into the theoretical. Ideas from math, including the theoretical side, are now being used in all sorts of new ways. I think the future of mathematics is to play an ever-larger role in society—and that’s good for us.

**Notices:** What challenges will the AMS face in the coming years?

**Charney:** Almost all societies have been seeing a reduction in membership. People just don’t join things anymore. Everything’s available online, so why bother to pay a membership fee? But I claim that there is much to be gained from getting involved in professional societies. The AMS does a great deal for the mathematics community through publications, advocacy, meetings, professional development, etc., and it’s also an opportunity to make all kinds of connections with other people. There are so many great reasons to join the AMS!

**Notices:** Have you given any advice to Bryna Kra about being president?

**Charney:** We’ve certainly discussed how to move forward on various issues. Bryna has been very involved in the AMS for years, so she knows what she’s getting into. We may have slightly different perspectives on some things, but I’m sure it will be a smooth transition and she will bring great energy to the job.

An interview with Bryna Kra, the incoming AMS president, will appear in the February 2023 issue of Notices of the AMS.

Credit

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