Letters to the Editor

Remembering Alex Rosenberg

The obituary notice for the influential mathematician Alex Rosenberg in the May 2008 issue touched a chord in my memory, for my father and Alex Rosenberg were colleagues at Northwestern University when I was a small child. I fondly recall one summer evening when my father was entertaining the family after dinner by recounting the amusing pseudonyms used by various mathematicians. The telephone rang, interrupting an etymological discussion of the name A. C. Zitronenbaum. My father lifted the receiver, listened for a moment, and then chuckled. "Why, hello, Alex. We were just talking about you!"

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What Bombelli Knew

I refer to Sanford Segal's review of John Derbyshire's book *Unknown Quantity* in the May 2008 issue of the *Notices,* page 584. We are told, I am sure correctly, that 4 is one of the solutions to $x^3 = 15x + 4$, but Segal, Derbyshire, and others have been strangely reluctant to disclose the other two solutions. These are in fact $-2 - 3^{0.5}$ and $-2 + 3^{0.5}$, computed from finding the roots of complex numbers. There is no evidence that these other two solutions were known to Bombelli.

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Memories of Elbert Cox and Removing Barriers

Two items in the May *Notices* caught my attention.

a) "Evansville honors the first black Ph.D. in mathematics and his family", by Talitha Washington. There is reference to Elbert Cox as the first African-American to to get a Ph.D. in mathematics. His supervisor was W. L. G. Williams. Prof. Williams was a teacher of mine at McGill and is the father of my wife Christine. She got a Ph.D. in mathematics at Yale University. Elbert was a regular visitor to the Williams home in Ithaca and it is reported that he used to bounce Christine on his knees—she was still an infant!

b) The other item mentions an award to the University of Iowa mathematics department for their leadership in recruiting and developing "underrepresented" minorities.

I should like to add that I was appointed to the council of the AMS in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I had been interested in recruiting into the graduate program at Penn State members of the groups referred to at that time as "disadvantaged". I proposed to the council that a committee be appointed to consider ways and means by which this might be done. The term "disadvantaged" referred to women, blacks (now referred to as "African-Americans"), Hispanics, Native Americans, and others. The committee, comprising outstanding scholars, worked diligently and, whether through its stimulus, or more likely, spontaneously, there arose the "National Association of Mathematicians" and the "Association for Women in Mathematics".

I was optimistic at that time and predicted that all racial and sexual barriers would disappear by the end of the century. It is gratifying to see that much progress has been made, but much work remains to be done.

—Raymond Ayoub
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More on "Visualizing the Sieve of Eratosthenes"

Since the publication of "Visualizing the Sieve of Eratosthenes" in the May 2008 issue of *Notices*, I have heard from a number of correspondents.

Brian Hayes has informed me of some similar work by himself and others which has appeared previously and which, had it been available at the time I prepared my *Notices* article, I would have acknowledged. One easily accessible such noted by Hayes is the article by J. J. Ventrella available at `http://www.divisorplot.com`.

William Keith, Zachary Strider McGregor-Dorsey, Oliver Rudolph, and others have offered explanations of the parabolas I mentioned and which Bill Casselman indicated on the cover of the May issue. I would like to thank them for their correspondence and insights.

A number of people have written requesting software. I have provided some updated software for creating and exploring the Sieve images at `http://www.guffy.net/sieve`. I had previously requested that people write me for the software. However, the website now provides a direct link to the software.

I would also like to mention that the Sieve article in the *Notices* was an outgrowth of work that I had started in 2003. In 2004 I posted a preliminary result of this work on my website at `http://www.guffy.net/matrix.htm` and then asked for comments in an Internet news group. The 2004 news group discussion which ensued has been archived and can be viewed at `http://www.mathkb.com/Uwe/Forum.aspx/math/13894/An-interesting-matrix`.

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