

## **Orange Crocs are the new Pocket Protector**

**By Farren Stainton**

**The Sharon Academy**

**Interviewee: Heather Vonada**

If you were asked to visit the White House to receive an award, what would you wear? You would probably choose to wear fancy clothes and shoes. Heather Vonada, Vermont's Presidential Award for Excellence in Math Teaching winner for 2017 (awarded in 2019) had other ideas. She proudly wore her signature orange Crocs as she received her award, unlike any other teacher at the ceremony. Ms. Vonada is a one-of-a-kind, award-winning math teacher who, with a simple footwear selection, demonstrated the power of being your own person no matter the setting.

Ms. Vonada grew up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. She lived in a family that expected her to do her homework and chores without being asked, and come home with an A. She was very competitive with her only older brother and they motivated each other to be the best they could. To this day, she says the only reason she would get a doctoral degree would be to tie him in the number of degrees they have.

It is hard to believe Ms. Vonada did not always love math. As a child, she was forced to do math as mad minutes in 4th grade. She did not like just remembering facts. She would second guess herself frequently. She remembers learning division in 2nd grade, which is not an appropriate age, and she felt confused. Ms. Vonada always had an appreciation for math, but she did not start loving math until she was in the 12th grade. She recalls this love started in Barry Ware's Calculus class. His door said "Calculus B. Ware," and she thought that was great! She describes his math class as an engaging Calculus experience. In this class, she learned that math is not just memorization, but complex ideas and numbers that mean things in the real world.

After she fell in love with math in high school, Ms. Vonada went to St. Michael's College in Colchester, VT to get a degree in math! She had a math teacher who enriched her love for math even more and they are still friends to this day! After college, she got her Bachelor's of Science in Math and Secondary Education. After college, she went to China's Sichuan Province where hot and spicy food is from, to do a 9th-semester teaching program. Ms. Vonada taught English there for 6 months and still visits because it is a special place for her!

Two experiences prompted Ms. Vonada to become a math teacher. First, in the 8th grade, she was taking Algebra, and it was very challenging for her. She stayed after school every day to get help from her teacher to understand what she was learning. However, even after all of that hard work, she got a C in the class. Ms. Vonada said she was the proudest of that grade than any other because she worked hard to get it. Ms. Vonada decided that she wanted to be a teacher because she wanted to help students get the best math understanding they could even if their end result was only a C. Second, Ms. Vonada's mentor teacher in college asked what her worst nightmare would be for a teaching assignment. Ms. Vonada said "middle school math." The mentor teacher promptly sent her to a middle school class, and she fell in love with it. She knew she wanted to teach at the secondary level for sure.

What makes math special to many people is learning about once thought to be impossible theories, and Ms. Vonada is no different. She loves the Pythagorean theorem and Fermat's last theorem. She even got to meet Andrew Wiles who proved Fermat's last theorem that no 3 positive integers will satisfy the Pythagorean theorem. It showed her that great mathematicians are not just people from the past but, anyone who is curious and tries hard enough. Ms. Vonada also enjoys the simple aspects of

math. Her favorite number is 23 because it is her Mother's birthday, the number she always had on her sports jersey, and it always brought her good luck!

For much of Ms. Vonada's career as a math teacher, she pictured a typical mathematician as an old man wearing a pocket protector who spent every minute doing math. Ms. Vonada had some colleagues that were so smart they could do any math problem in 30 seconds, and she thought that's what defined them as mathematicians. It has only been in the last 5 years that she has thought of herself as a mathematician, and her teaching award solidified this for her. She realized that mathematicians are people who work hard, persevere through hard problems, crumple a lot of paper because they try so many ways to solve problems, and are curious. Her students have helped her come up with new ways to think about math, and they have helped her develop a new picture of a mathematician: of any gender, and most certainly wearing orange Crocs!

**My name is Farren Stainton, I am in 8th grade and am taking Algebra 2 at the Sharon Academy Middle School in Sharon VT. My math interests include graphs, how data applies to the real world, and fractals, especially the Mandelbrot Fractal. This year I was also honored by placing first in the National Essay contest in the Middle School division.**