

Math help available to those lacking x+y chromosome

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If a train is traveling at 75 mph and there are 50 people on the train, how long would it take a math student to hate this type of question?

The dreaded word problem. Miles, speed, weight, height. Many of us cringe at the memory: our No. 2 pencils poised, our brains hurting from the looming numbers.

Math tutors Mathew Williamson and Julie Chamberlin hope to alleviate that dread for local kids. With their recent purchase of Mathnasium in New Tampa, they're making a career out of helping students succeed in math.

"Kids don't hate math," Williamson said. "They hate the frustration of not knowing how to do it."

Mathnasium is a math learning center franchise that started in Los Angeles about six years ago.

There are now 136 Mathnasium centers in the United States and 63 in 14 other countries.

The New Tampa center opened on Cross Creek Boulevard across from Benito Middle School in August 2006. Williamson and Chamberlin, who live just south of Tampa Palms, bought it last October.

The young entrepreneurs graduated in 2007 from the University of South Florida — Williamson with a graduate degree in mathematics and Chamberlin with a bachelor's degree in biology.

The couple moved together from Venice to attend USF. After graduation, Williamson began working at Mathnasium. Chamberlin worked for a veterinarian and volunteered at Mathnasium in the afternoons.

"I enjoyed teaching," Chamberlin said. "I just fell in love with the place."

Before long, the two talked of opening their own center. They got that opportunity sooner than they thought when former owner Monica Otera offered to sell it to them so she could stay home with her children.

"It's been wonderful. I really see myself doing this for the rest of my life," Chamberlin said.

The Mathnasium teaching method was developed by Larry Martinek, a teacher and consultant in the Los Angeles area for the past 30 years. The method is based on the concept of number sense, or the fundamentals of how numbers work.

"If you don't know how numbers work, then you won't know how to apply that to a word problem or an equation," Williamson said.

Williamson started out as a computer science major at Manatee Community College in Venice.

"I hated math, but I was good at it," Williamson said. "I had a great teacher who turned it around for me, and I started to love it. ... That's what I try to do every day with kids; I try to make them want to come back."

The center offers math tutoring for students from first grade through college, including SAT preparation. Mathnasium assesses students' skills and personalizes a tutoring plan based on strengths and weaknesses. Students can sign up for a six-month or one-year plan.

"We know parents are not teachers," Williamson said. "If there's a concept that a child is not getting, we can explain it in different ways."

The center is open 3 to 7 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and 10 a.m. to noon Saturdays. Morning hours will be offered in the summer. Kids work independently and receive one-on-one help from one of the center's five instructors.

"Our students vary," Chamberlin said. "Some are struggling and need help. Others come for extra practice and help with homework, and others are actually advanced and come to be challenged and get ahead."

Mathnasium aims to get every student advanced and ready for the next level. Since the couple took over, the center has grown from 33 students to 51.

"So many kids are locked out of certain fields like medicine because they struggle in math," said Williamson, who also teaches at USF and Hillsborough Community College. "Being able to conquer math opens up career choices for students later in life."