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21st annual Pi Mu Epsilon Regional Undergraduate Math Conference

Freshman mathematicians Amie Arnoldussen and Beth Holt report on last month's undergraduate math conference on campus, an event which drew student presenters from across the Midwest.

Snowball fights will never be the same again since we heard about mathematical snowflakes from a student speaker at a conference hosted on campus Nov. 3-4. This winter we will be able to discuss snowballs composed of Koch snowflakes and the infinite perimeter as they fly through the air toward our targets.

Kelly Pepke, of Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, was one of 16 student speakers at the 21st annual Pi Mu Epsilon Regional Undergraduate Math Conference. She introduced two types of snowflakes in her talk on fractals. The Koch snowflake is one in which equilateral triangles are added to the previous triangles on the perimeter, allowing for an infinite perimeter but a finite area.

We picked up lots more table talk, too, from talks with titles like "Carrots Love Tomatoes," a presentation by Natalie Bly from the College of St. Benedict (Minn.) that provided everyday situations for math.

A total of 132 people attended this year's event. They learned about alternative applications of math, took part in Face Off! The Mathematics Game Show, and enjoyed two presentations from guest speaker Woody Dudley.

At Dudley's comical speech on "Angle Trisectors," we learned that it is impossible to trisect an angle with a compass and straightedge, but this doesn't stop people from trying. Dudley, a math professor retired from DePauw University (Ind.), told us that when mathematicians say it's impossible, it means it really is impossible.

Unfortunately, this doesn't impact trisectors. One man devoted six years of his life trying to overcome the impossible. He was left with a mass of calculations and a confusing drawing that even the game of Twister couldn't untangle!

The undergraduate math conference is organized each year by the Math Club and sponsored by Sigma Nu Delta, Pi Mu Epsilon and the St. Norbert College student chapter of the Mathematical Association of America.

Representatives attended from Bradley University, St. John's University, St. Olaf College, the College of St. Benedict, Mount Mary College, the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Carthage College, Benedictine University and more.

The conference provided a great opportunity to experience math outside of the classroom and some answers to the infamous question, "When will we ever use this?"

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