

Helah Snelling

Teach your Teachers Well

When Professor Sharpe smiles, it's so genuine, her whole face glows; there is nothing perfunctory about it. And it's that smile that put me immediately at ease on the day of our interview. I discovered Professor Sharpe on the UNH website and was intrigued by the information in her short bio. Taking a chance, I contacted her to conduct an interview. As we scheduled and rescheduled to accommodate my school calendar, her response was warm and kind. Sharpe makes even the most reserved student, such as myself, feel relaxed and comfortable speaking. This ability to put students at ease is her gift. Thankfully, Prof. Sharpe isn't just teaching students, she's teaching future teachers, so her gifts will continue to give. When she educates her students on topics such as math education, she teaches by example, showing hundreds of future teachers how to be approachable, with something as simple as a patient smile.

Professor Sheree T. Sharpe was born in Jamaica in 1981. Growing up, she had a large extended family, and many cousins with whom she spent summers and Sundays. Despite her aptitude for mathematics, Sharpe was a bit of a troublemaker as a child; always being outside where she shouldn't be, or not being home when the sun came down, as she and her brother spent a great deal of time outdoors.

Throughout her life, Professor Sharpe has always excelled in mathematics. In high school, she was a year ahead of the other students. However, her skill emerged as early as elementary school where, if she was late to class, she was able to look at the board and solve a math problem without the teacher needing to explain it. She enjoyed helping friends who struggled to understand concepts -- an interesting hint at her future career. "I've always been good at {math}, and I feel like, because I've been good at it, I enjoy doing it," she told me thoughtfully in regard to her math education.

After high school, Professor Sharpe attended Wesleyan College, a small all-women's school in Georgia, where she achieved a double major in mathematics and business. Following graduation, Sharpe received a scholarship to attend the University of Georgia as a teaching assistant, and there she earned her Masters in Mathematics. Through these years of study, she fell in love with the teaching of mathematics, which led her to pursue and achieve her PhD in Mathematics Education from the University of Miami.

After graduation, Professor Sharpe taught high school level Algebra 2 for seven months. However, she didn't feel like the career was fulfilling enough for her, as she commented, "I enjoyed teaching, but I wanted to make a bigger difference; I wanted to make a difference at the teacher level, because I believed that if I can make an impact at the teacher level, that teacher will go along and make an impact at the student level, so I can reach much more." I then understood what she was telling me; by teaching teachers, she indirectly helps thousands of students every day.

Having decided on a career path, Sharpe soon accepted a position at UNH, where she has worked for the past four years. At the University of New Hampshire, Professor Sharpe teaches a variety of mathematical courses, mainly focused on different levels of math education, such as teaching future K-8 and High School teachers.

Professor Sharpe has also conducted research studies on a variety of different topics. In one study, she researched the transition in middle school from arithmetic to algebra. She surveyed factors around the student, such as the teacher, parents, and school, that affect student learning, and cause students to lose interest in mathematics. When Sharpe decided to pursue math education, she didn't just receive an education in how to teach; she also took the time to research what types of teaching methods are effective and ineffective, and the best

ways to help the students. Her intention was, and is, that future teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to help their students succeed in math.

Professor Sharpe's other main study involved the relationship between teachers taking part in a professional development workshop and their students' knowledge growth, specifically in algebra. The teachers all began at different skill levels, and the students were tested both before and after the teachers participated in the workshop. Sharpe found that a small amount of learning by the teacher can cause a significant amount of learning for the students, as students' test scores greatly increased by the end of their teacher's workshop. Both of Sharpe's research topics were very telling about what she values in education. Her calling in life is to make a difference in the lives of young students, gifted mathematicians or not.

When I asked Professor Sharpe about any advice she had for young women looking to pursue a career in mathematics, she smiled in her usual warm hearted way and began, "Be comfortable with mathematics. It's ok to make mistakes, as that's the best way to learn and make sense of mathematics." When the conversation shifted to studying, she said, "No one can go through it alone." I realized then the type of teacher she was; she never wants any student to be left behind, and hopes for every student to feel comfortable in a classroom, whether math is their thing, or not. When Professor Sharpe teaches, she not only thinks of *her* students, but also of her student's future students. Her trajectory of influence is far and impactful.

While I may never major in math, nor become a teacher, I learned a lot from Professor Sharpe, and I hope our paths cross again someday. And I envy the students in her classroom, and the students in the classroom of those future teachers. I imagine those teachers smile when they enter a classroom, and always make their students feel welcome. Professor Sheree Sharpe teaches her teachers well.