

PROFESSORS YOU LOVE

The smartest person I ever met

Dr. Taalman was an integral part of My Madison Experience

BY KRISTIN McNAMARA ('09)

Without a doubt, associate professor of mathematics Dr. Laura Taalman is the best teacher I ever had.

She was not only my academic adviser, she also taught four of my JMU mathematics classes: Discrete Mathematics and Introduction to Proof, Algebraic Topology, Advanced Linear Algebra, and Graph Theory. I cannot imagine having gone through college without her.

Dr. Taalman is one of the most tolerant and patient professors I have encountered. She is always willing to work with students outside of class, a trait of which I took great advantage! She goes out of her way to ensure that students are learning. She is an expert at guiding students toward answers rather than *giving* students answers. What's more, she is the smartest person I have ever met. I can only hope that someday I might be as accomplished.

Four years of the "Dr. Taalman Experience" — as both my professor and adviser — proved to be a great advantage for me. As a slightly daunted freshman from rural Vermont, who had decided to thrust myself into a school twice the size of my hometown, I learned early to capitalize on her advice. I have always loved math, but in signing up for college math courses, I hoped my head start — I began freshman year



Mathematics professor Laura Taalman is the 2009 JMU College of Science and Mathematics Distinguished Teacher. Former student Kristin McNamara ('09) calls her "the smartest person" she ever met.

About the Professor *Laura Taalman, associate professor of mathematics, joined the JMU faculty in 2000. She won the 2009 JMU College of Science and Mathematics Distinguished Teaching Award, and in 2005 the Mathematical Association of America selected her for a Henry L. Alder Award as one of the most distinguished beginning college professors in North America. Just for fun, Taalman writes her own math textbooks, and in 2007 she published Color Sudoku with her husband, Phil Riley. When not puzzling over her research, Taalman enjoys spending time with her husband and their son, Calvin Grey Riley. Read more at www.jmu.edu/bethechange/people/taalman.shtml.*

About the Author *Kristin McNamara ('09) double majored in mathematics and Spanish. The Vermont native is attending the University of Tennessee graduate school in the mathematics Ph.D. program. She found out about Madison's Professors You Love column by following @JMUAlumni on Twitter.com.*

with 11 credits — would allow me to get away with taking no more than one math class a semester. Little did I know that Dr. Taalman was headed my way and that she would save me from making that mistake. Somehow, by simply saying, "It would just be better for you, and I think you would really like it," she managed to convince me to take at least two math classes each semester. In the end, she was right.

Dr. Taalman introduced me to topology, my greatest mathematical interest as well as a subject I pursued for eight weeks this past summer at an external research program. Until she told me about it, I was completely unaware that research opportunities like these existed for undergraduate students. Her help was invaluable to me throughout the application process for these research programs, and I give her a lot of credit for putting up with my pestering questions, qualms and complaints.

Dr. Taalman also helped me as I began the process of applying to graduate schools. I was accepted at several, and I am

sure that Dr. Taalman's beautifully worded recommendation letter greatly influenced those admittance decisions. Deciding on a graduate school was one of the most important decisions I have ever made, and Dr. Taalman was right there. She was a wondrous display of patience through my incessant questions about grad schools and the processes and politics surrounding them.

Before I began my undergraduate career, I had no intention of continuing my education past a bachelor's degree. However, Dr. Taalman, who should be recognized for her continuing persistence, chipped away at me for years and succeeded in getting me to see my own potential. Now, I hope to earn a doctorate in mathematics.

I owe it all to Dr. Taalman for planting that seed in me. She is an integral part of my Madison Experience and my life. I am thankful she happened to be teaching Discrete Mathematics the semester I needed to take it. Since then, she has played an extremely important role in shaping my education as well as guiding many of the important decisions I have made regarding my future. ✍