Lots of UA employees bring their children to campus for fun events like football games, performances, Spring Fling and museum visits. Vector calculus class isn't usually one of the destinations.

But for three UA parents, that's right where their kids want to be.

Of the six high-achieving high school students who are learning vector calculus at the UA thanks to a unique partnership among the University, the Tucson Unified School District and the Thomas R. Brown Foundations two are the children of UA employees.

One is Sam Merson, a 17-year-old senior at University High School. His father, Donald Merson, is a principal applications systems analyst and developer in the Student Financial Aid office and was the principal/architect of Scholarship Universe, a website that matches UA students to thousands of scholarship opportunities and streamlines the application process.

The other is Talia Tax, a 15-year-old junior at UHS. She is the daughter of University Distinguished Outreach Professor Frans Tax and Lisa Nagy, both professors in the Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology.

Sam and Talia showed an early aptitude for math.

"He could count to past 100 before he was even 1 year old," Donald Merson said of Sam. "He's always loved numbers and letters and reading. Math has been interesting to him since he was still in diapers. He likes to sit around and think about math."

Nagy said Talia's gift for math is complemented by many other interests.

"She's just as interested in chemistry and biology. Right now, she's all excited about U.S. history class," Nagy said, adding that Talia also plays the flute and competes in varsity soccer and cross-country. "She loves math and thinks it's really fun, but she isn't going to go on and be a mathematician. It just has always come pretty easy to her. She's moved along in it and enjoys it without it being the driving force behind her life."

Sam and Talia have benefited from parents who nurtured their educational growth through a combination of school choices and extracurricular academic opportunities.

"We'd always talk about math," Donald Merson said. "I've been telling them (his children) since they were little kids that math explains the world, so they've always felt that."

He credited the UA's Department of Mathematics for helping to foster Sam's passion for the subject. Before Sam was old enough to compete in national middle school math competitions,
he was invited to solve problems through Tucson Math Circle [3], a UA outreach program that promotes and develops interactions between secondary school students and mathematicians through weekly problem-solving sessions.

"They would have people from the UA math department come in and teach them fun things about math," Donald Merson said. "It was really nice of them, actually. When they got to go to the Math Circle at the University of Arizona and do fun things, to me, that reinforces the idea that math can be fun."

Nagy recalls taking Talia to public science lectures at the UA when she was in middle school.

"She's sort of fearless. I remember her raising her hand to ask a Nobel laureate physicist a question after his seminar that was right on mark," she said. "She's been part of the University community by default, because both of her parents are professors."

Talia says the Tucson Festival of Books is her favorite UA event, and also has enjoyed summer robotics, architecture and soccer camps.

"I think knowing the UA pretty well has definitely made taking a college class easier," Talia said. "It's much less scary than it could have been! The math room is within walking distance of my parents' labs, so nothing is completely unfamiliar."

While many find Talia's scholastic accomplishments impressive, Nagy said Talia takes it all in stride.

"In an interesting way, she doesn't think it's unusual. That's just who she is. It's just the next step. So it's kind of cool, actually," Nagy said.

"We haven't had that many classes yet, but so far I really like the experience," Talia said. "The teacher seems really smart, and it's a great feeling to be in a classroom with people who all care about math and learning. I'm honored to be able to be a part of it."

For a parent, the UA is a great place because of how much it has to offer children, Nagy said.

"We really appreciate the UA for providing her with this opportunity."

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