

# The Mobile Mathematical Society: Bringing Math to the People

Dan Silver

It was an off-the-cuff challenge. Start an informal mathematical society. Have meetings in a coffee house. It was hopelessly naive.

I had just told my history of mathematics class about the early days of the Royal Society. Robert Boyle, John

enthusiasm for coffee. The Mobile Mathematical Society, a community-based organization in Mobile, Alabama, was born without any university affiliation, organizational structure or cash. After three years,



**Professor Thomas Banchoff makes a virtual appearance at a Society event.**

Wallis, Christopher Wren and others with huge scientific appetites met to “discourse and consider Philosophical Enquiries.” In mid-seventeenth century England, the spirit of inquiry pervaded the coffee houses of London, not the two backward-looking universities at Cambridge and Oxford. (Wallis, who intended to be a professor of mathematics, had to leave Cambridge because “that study had died out there.”) The common cord that joined these early scientists more than two centuries before the word “scientist” was invented was enthusiasm.

Although my challenge was naive, I had underestimated my students’

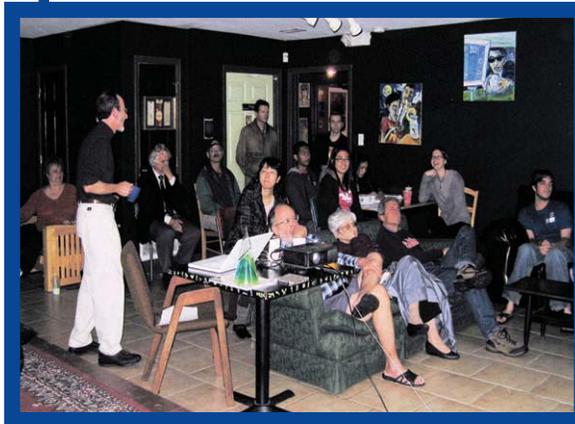
it retains all of these youthful characteristics. Sarah Brewer and

Josh Wheeler, both former students from the history of mathematics course, and colleague Susan Williams supply much of the required energy. Sarah completed her master’s degree in mathematics at University of South Alabama, and she now teaches at the Alabama School of Mathe-

tics and Science in Mobile. Thanks to her, we see a good number of bright high school students at our events. Being a sleepy port city, Mobile eagerly supports several independent coffee houses. My favorite, Satori Coffee House, occupies an old house decorated with memorabilia from its funky former days as a used record store. The owner, a generous guy who supports a variety of activities, reserves a large back room for our use without charge one night each month, usually the second Wednesday. James Davis, another former history of mathematics student, works at Satori and helps with technical requirements.



**(from left to right) Nate Phillips, Erin Jung, and Zac Ingram; photo by Susan Williams**



**Albrecht Dürer presentation; photo by Susan Williams**

When you have no budget, you need free advertising. Like any community, Mobile has good outlets for gratis publicity. The public radio station, WHIL 93.1, reads announcements of our meet-

ings. The city's largest newspaper, the Mobile Press-Register, prints them. A web bulletin board run by the Mobile Arts Council is our third information freeway. The key is to write short, engaging announcements and submit them with sufficient lead-time. Naturally, the Mobile Mathematical Society

with the chance to empty our desks of trinkets acquired at various Joint Mathematics Meetings. (How many NSA coasters does anyone really need?) We had managed to borrow enough slide

maintains a web page [www.mobilemathematicalsociety.org](http://www.mobilemathematicalsociety.org), and all announcements refer there for more detailed information.

Themes of our monthly meetings have varied from a dramatic presentation based on the last poem of James Clerk Maxwell to a casual night of games. A pictorial essay on the art and mathe-



(left to right) Susan Williams, Josh Wheeler, Dan Silver and Sarah Brewer; photo by Greta Sharp, Mobile Press-Register

mathematics of Albrech Dürer, inspired by a magnificent exhibition at the Mobile Museum of Art, brought out a particularly large and enthusiastic crowd.

Slide Rule Night was an intentionally geeky evening that offered to teach participants how to use the legendary slip-stick. The poster's promise of "worthless prizes" for contest champions provided me and my colleagues

rules for everyone, but we were happily surprised when someone showed up with his own impressive collection. The poster's suggestion "Bring a date!" was a joke, but at least one person took it seriously.

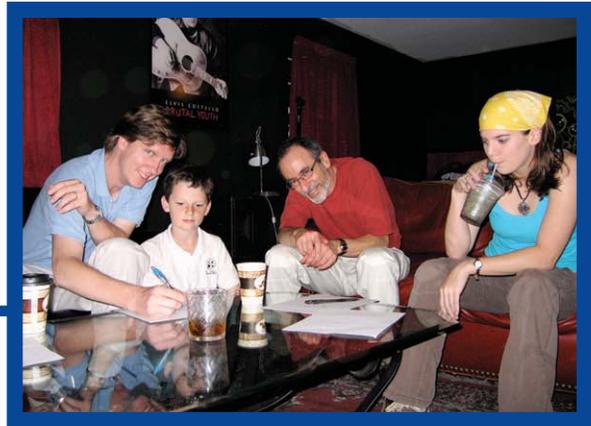
Our most successful event so far has been a showing of a recent film version of *Flatland*. Memorabilia on display included both the first and second editions of Edwin Abbott's famous

novel of 1884. But what made the evening truly memorable was a live question and answer session with Professor Thomas Banchoff of Brown University, a

mathematics advisor for the film and an expert on the book. Using a laptop, projector, speakers and

Skype software, we were all able to see and talk with each other for nearly an hour.

Although the Mobile Mathematical Society



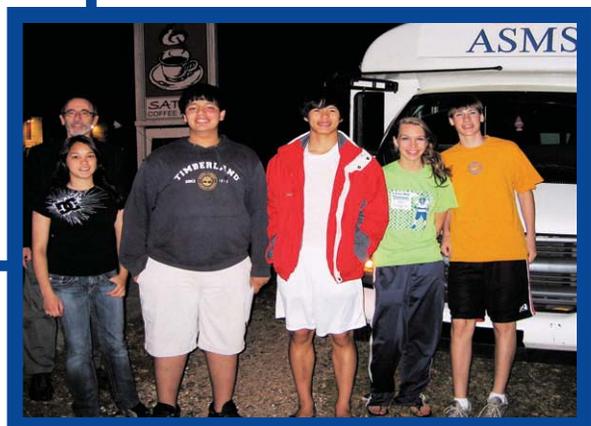
(left to right) Josh and John Barnard, Dan Silver; photo by Susan Williams

began as an experiment, loosely modeled on the early Royal Society, it has claimed its own identity as a community organization. Those who enjoy mathematics in any form, from string theory to Sudoku puzzles, will find a welcome here—and some very good coffee.

**About the author:** Dan Silver is a professor of mathematics at the University of South Alabama. Dan's research area is topology, specifically knots and links. He collaborates with Dr. Susan Williams on connections with symbolic and algebraic dynamical systems. His other interests include music, art and antiquarian books.

email: [silver@jaguar1.usouthal.edu](mailto:silver@jaguar1.usouthal.edu)

DOI: 10.4169/194762110X495443



(left to right) Missy Tygart, Shawn Sharma, Kevin Wu, Heather Jones and Matthew Robson; photo by Susan Williams