

## The Greatest Gift I've Received

I walked up to the big, brown door in front me. Number 319. My heart was racing as I heard the noise of conversations and laughter on the other side.

*This is it. My first meeting of the Math Club.*

All my life I loved math and I knew it was for me. From the first time I solved a problem in class to the times I won competitions at school, I've felt a deep appreciation and love for math. Every time I solved a math equation, a little sense of joy and thrill would spread within me. Deep down, I knew the Math Club was the perfect place for me to share my passion for math with other classmates. I didn't just need to be here, I belonged here.

But, a little part of me felt extremely nervous. Scared. Terrified.

*What if I embarrass myself? Maybe I should just turn back and try again next year. No. No, I can't. You got this. Just act natural.*

I pushed the door open, nervous yet excited to see what was waiting for me.

When I entered the room, I was overwhelmed with surprise. I didn't think there would be too many people in the club, but the room said otherwise. It was packed with so many 7th and 8th grade "giants" talking and laughing. I spotted a few 6th graders scattered here and there, but I only knew two of them.

With my hood up and hands glued into my pockets, I weaved my way around everyone and sat in the far corner of the room. The courage I had used to enter the room seemed to have disappeared in seconds and I could feel my legs trembling under the table. My stomach felt like it was twisting and turning inside me. The only thing I could with the nervousness I had was listen in on other conversations. There were a group of kids nearby discussing how to solve a calculus question.

*Calculus. Wait, calculus?! Isn't that taught in high school? How do they know about calculus already? Does everyone here know calculus?*

The words those kids were talking about - limits, derivatives, and integrals - seemed like a foreign language to me.

*What if I don't do well in the competitions that will be hosted? What if I embarrass myself in front of so many people? Do I even belong here?*

My heart was racing, and I could feel a splitting headache forming. So many students who knew calculus was the last thing I expected in a middle school math club. I was terrified for what was to come and what I was going to have to do.

After what seemed like ages, the door opened, and a teacher walked through. The teacher was a tall person, almost 6 feet, and wore small, silver, rectangular glasses. He wore a formal shirt and khaki pants, with some old, white Nike shoes. With a big smile and an incredibly deep voice, this teacher introduced himself as Mr. Leviten, the head coach of Math Club. After seeing him, I felt a sense of relief and despair; we were finally starting and it was too late to back down now. He began to explain the basic rules of Math Club and what competitions we would participate in, but everything went over my mind. My palms felt sweaty and I was vigorously tapping my foot. I couldn't focus at all. I was pulled back into reality when I heard Mr. Leviten announcing the friendly competition starting in a few minutes.

*Oh god. A test. It's ok, calm down. I've been doing this my whole life. I got this. I can win.*

As soon as Mr. Leviten handed out the test, I started grinding through the questions one by one and thought I was doing well. I managed to get through the first half of the test, but the second half was the real struggle, and it made me lose all hope. I kept rereading the questions over and over but I couldn't process any of it. I could only focus on everything but the words and numbers on the page. The ticking of the clock. My neighbor's pages flipping. Mr. Leviten pacing back and forth across the front of the room, reminding us of the time. I felt my stomach sink to the bottom of the floor and my breath shaking. My mind was racing with so many thoughts, but one thing was clear: I needed to win this. But before I could pull myself together, Mr. Leviten called time.

*What? But how? I didn't even look at a couple of questions. I didn't even finish.*

The only thing that was left for me to do was hope. Hope that I did good enough. I slowly walked up to the front to hand over my test. Mr. Leviten glanced at me and gave me a thumbs up

Maybe it was to cheer me up but it didn't work though. Nothing could work. I had to do well on that test. But I messed it up. I sank into my chair and received the news I dreaded but expected: I didn't win.

I walked down the hallways, my head hung low and my feet slowly shuffling against the floor. My friends tried to talk to me, but all I heard was Mr. Leviten announcing the results on repeat.

*That was horrible. I didn't even know what some of the questions were asking me. This test was the perfect opportunity to find my place in the club, but I couldn't even get through the second half of the test, while others were breezing through it. Maybe this isn't the right place for me after all.*

I looked up at the ceiling, gritting my teeth, trying so hard to resist the tears forming in my eyes. No matter how many deep breaths I took, nothing made me feel better. I felt horrible.

I moped around for a few days after that competition. A wave of emotions were tearing through my body, such as misery, despair, and despondency. I had failed. The one place I thought was right for me wasn't for me after all. The test was proof. I doubted whether I had what it takes to be a part of the competitive Math Club.

However, what I failed to realize is that there were also people who didn't win the competition but knew that the Math Club was the right place for them. When they noticed that I felt demotivated after the competition, they were there to help and support me.

One of my friends had an older brother who did Math Club, so he gave me many resources to practice with. We would sit down, and race to see who could solve problems faster for fun. Another friend, noticing how I was struggling to solve problems quickly, decided to teach me interesting and super efficient math formulas every week. He gave me tips for competitions and would walk me through each step to ensure I understood everything. It was this kind of support and encouragement from the Math Club community that made me gradually feel like I had a place in the club.

The Math Club was very welcoming; almost everyone was there to help me. Through Math Club, I made lots of great friends. Those intimidating 7th and 8th grade "giants" turned into people who I recognized and spent time outside of school with. They would help me out with difficult problems and pushed me to my limits to help me improve. One of my 8th grade friends

would give me a difficult math riddle every day. If I was stuck, he would write down the answer on a Sticky Note and encourage me to try the next one. I saw my math skills improve and good relationships with my peers begin to form. I truly felt like I belonged. With my newfound friends there to support me, I started working hard on my own too, and the results started to show. At the next competition, I was excited to see that my score improved from last time by 5 points. My friends came over to celebrate my win when I shared the news. I felt so happy that I achieved my goal. Sure, I didn't win, but all that matter to me was the progress I made because of the kindness and support I received from the peers and classmates that surrounded me. It wasn't the best score, but all that mattered to me was that I had done better by 5 points, and I knew that I couldn't have done it without the support and encouragement of friends from the Math Club.

The experience that I encountered with the Math Club serves as a reminder that it's really easy to feel alone when challenges make us question our abilities. However, I've learned that it isn't performing well or quantitative success that makes us feel like we belong, but rather the support of the community to show us that we always belonged. I know this won't be the last time I doubt my capabilities; there is so much more challenges to face in the future. But now, I realize that despite those obstacles, I'm still in the right place and I have people I can turn to when I feel demotivated. Perhaps this is a lesson we should always carry in our hearts: the greatest gift we can give others is the reassurance that they are in the right place and that we will be there to support them through every step of the way.