

Bringing Math to the Masses

by **LESLEE KOMAIKO**, Contributing Editor

In one of Robert Ahdoot's most popular YouTube videos, the 37-year-old Oak Park resident is wearing a Capt. Kirk shirt and standing before a white dry erase board.

Some silliness ensues as he explains that his elevator is broken. He then pretends to fix the imaginary elevator, squats down out of view and "rides" it back into the frame.

About a minute into the video, he gets to the meat of the matter: an algebra lesson on completing the square. The 21-minute video has more than half a million views. And there's not a single cat trick or guitar solo.

Welcome to Yay Math.

Ahdoot, who identifies as culturally Jewish, started Yay Math, which has grown into a series of more than 200 videos available on YouTube, in 2008. By then, he had been teaching math at de Toledo High School—at the time, New Community Jewish High School—for about four years. (Prior to that, he was a software programmer.) It was his first teaching position and it remains his job today.

That particular year, he felt there was "a synergy between students and teacher that was magnetic." The energy in the classroom, he adds,

ed, was beautiful, with lots of student participation. Ahdoot approached school administration about recording the lessons. They were receptive as long as students did not appear in the videos.

And they never do, though you can hear their laughter during Ahdoot's silly bits. More important, you can hear their actual questions along with Ahdoot's answers. So while YouTube viewers don't enjoy the camaraderie of a classroom environment, they do get a good facsimile, with all of the usual back-and-forth interaction between teacher and students.

Ahdoot, who plays several math-themed characters in many of the 200-plus videos, didn't show up the first day on the job in costume. He got the idea to appear in costume shortly after he started filming the math lessons. Around that time, he had a brief, comedic cameo in the school production of "Mame." Ahdoot asked the theater department if he could borrow the cape he wore in the show. Thus was born Mathemagician. A bumblebee called Bumblebee and The "Pi" rate soon followed.

If this all sounds more than a little goofy, that's because it is.

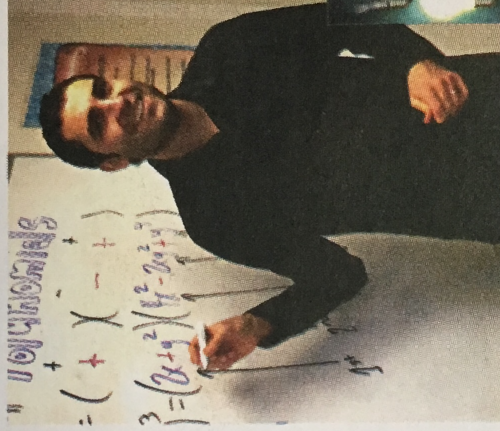
"Math can be so dry," Ahdoot said. "Cos-

Math

Continued from page 29

tion with the California-based Michelson 20MM Foundation, is "StatsCenter," a series of 16 high-octane videos modeled after ESPN's "SportsCenter" and designed to introduce viewers to statistics. The idea is that a spoonful of sports plus a dash of absurdity makes stats class fun. The series will debut in May on Yay Math's YouTube channel.

Currently, all of Ahdoot's videos are available for free. And he intends to keep it that way.



Robert Ahdoot Photos courtesy of Robert Ahdoot

tunes are one of the ways to break down barriers students may have and keep it light."

He also thinks they are key to his Internet success. After all, which would you rather watch during a lesson about circles or surface area: a PowerPoint presentation or a guy in a

bee costume?

"It's one reason it floated to the top of search results," Ahdoot said. "I have never spent a cent on marketing."

Ahdoot's enthusiasm for the subject also comes through loud and clear in the videos.

"I'm excited," he says, with real emotion before a lesson on areas of circles. "Are you excited?" And, in another video: "It's our first time doing probability as a class. It's going to be a lot of fun."

He brings a warmth to material that often gets little love.

"He is wonderful," said Julia Grant, a de Toledo ninth-grader currently in Ahdoot's geometry class. "He often says, 'Everything I do is in your best interest,' and he really sticks to that. He spends a lot of time truly making sure that everyone understands [the material] before we move on."

"He's so real," Julia added. "We're often laughing or joking around."

Ahdoot's latest project, done in conjunction with

See MATH on page 72

Ahdoot addresses all of this in "One-on-One." The book, published by Morgan James in January of this year, includes a chapter titled "To-Do's," with sections such as "Yes-anding" and "I know what you mean," as well as one called simply, "Admit when you're wrong or confused." There is another chapter, albeit a much shorter one, called "NOT To-Do's."

Ahdoot's ultimate goal is to make Yay Math a household name.

"There is no such thing as 'not a math student,'" he said. "It may take a little more work. But everyone has the capacity for math success, without a doubt." ■

On-One 101: The Art of Inspired & Effective Individualized Instruction" was written primarily for teachers and parents. It was born of the individual, one-on-one relationships Ahdoot said he has with his students. "The thought occurred to me: How do you create that?" he said.

"Any book that's [already] out there on how to be an effective coach or trainer, they spend so much time talking about the craft and spend the least amount of time talking about your candor, or words you can say, certain things you can say to invite people into your work, where to sit, intonation, use of silence, use of praise, how to get them back on track."

"My model is creating something of amazing value to people and letting it be a flag that attracts people to the movement," he said.

He receives emails and calls from all over the world from grateful students, such as the one he shared from Emilia, 24, of Sweden. "Math became the enemy," she wrote. "I want to be a biologist. But to do this, I need math. You have taught me everything I know about math."

Ahdoot hopes the videos lead to more partnerships and speaking opportunities. In 2012, for example, he did a TED Talk on conquering math anxiety at TEDxAJU.

He also recently penned his first book. "One-