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The Simpson Scholars

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ASU's Satellite Q & A Forum

By Leigh Ann Henion

Last week, Appalachian State University wrangled a live satellite feed from the Museum of Television and Radio to bring students face to virtual face with the creator, voices and writers of the popular television show The Simpsons.



Armed with equipment borrowed from the distance-learning center, the ITC department arranged for a Simpsons party to take place in the Plemmons Student Union. Troy Tuttle, of ASU's ITC graphics department, spearheaded the effort to provide ASU access to the satellite broadcast of the interview. Though his department posted flyers about the showing only two days before the event, the response was enormous.

An hour before the panel was to appear via satellite, students were pushing their way towards the door to get a bracelet that would allow them admission. There were 120 orange and white bracelets to be handed out and many devoted fans were turned away.

"Word of mouth spread like wildfire. I was praying for 50 people. I didn't expect this, we've turned away hundreds," Tuttle said, observing the crowds of kids still lingering by the door even after the last bracelet was handed out.

NEWS

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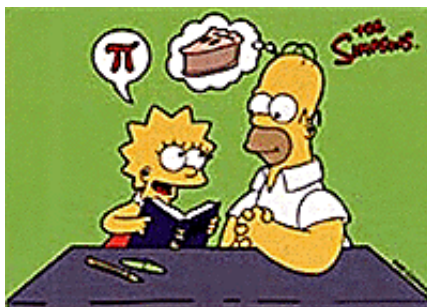
4:30 News
The Latest Updates...

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The stragglers, circling the entrance, were eagerly peeking into the room where their peers were dining on pink iced donuts, Homer Simpson's favorite snack. Some had their own refreshments, including Red Stripe bottles covered with handmade Duff labels, a tribute to Homer's favorite beer.

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When asked why so many students were still waiting even though there were no more tickets, Billy Knight replied, "There still might be a chance to get in there. The Simpsons are a cultural phenomenon." Jane Boggs said, "When you were a kid. This is what your mom was telling you to turn off." Another student, laughing, added, "Yeah. Then you'd say 'eat my shorts Mom'."

"Eat my shorts," was a favorite phrase of Bart Simpson's that was echoed by many kids that now make up the twenty-somethings. As one ASU student observed, "The Simpsons are almost as old as I am."

The Simpsons were introduced on The Tracey Ullman Show in April of 1987. Matt Groening, the show's creator and guest panelist at last week's discussion said, "I always thought it would be a hit." Fourteen seasons later, the show is still going strong. The Simpsons has been renewed for two more seasons, which will make it the longest-running situation comedy in television history.

Bart mania took place in the early 90's inspiring bootleg Bart Simpson t-shirts and other merchandise. Groening has tried not to let the mainstream popularity of the show affect the quality of the writing. "The nature of fads is that they rise and they fall. What I tried to do was keep in mind that the show, in and of itself, was a quality piece of work, and so did everybody else who worked on the show."

The Simpsons is scripted by a highly educated group of writers, mostly Harvard graduates. The smart, cynical humor of the show has seeped from college culture and into the classroom where, nationwide, professors of art, physics, English and mathematics are integrating The Simpsons into their curriculum.

Sarah Greenwald, ASU professor of mathematics, has co-authored a web site compiling all Simpson's mathematical references. In the classroom she includes the show in the lesson plan. "It's a way to get them laughing and conquer their math phobias...They start laughing, but then they start asking questions."

There are many examples of math in The Simpsons, but Greenwald specifically recalls a particular show in which two girls at a school for the gifted are, in the rhythm of patty-cake, say, "Here're the digits that make Pi – 3.14159...."

Greenwald was given the honor of asking ASU's live question to The Simpson's panel. The question, preceded by yelps from the students seeing their name appear on the live-feed screen read, "Since The Simpsons contains many references to subject matter and scholars from various



WINNER

1st place

Best Non-daily
Newspaper
Website,
National
Newspaper
Association,
2000

2nd place

Best Non-daily
Newspaper
Website,
National
Newspaper
Association,
2001

academic fields, many teachers, including myself, incorporate aspects from the show into their classrooms in order to motivate and engage their students. My students and I want to know what your motivation is for including these references and whether any of the writers majored in math or science.”

In response, Groening said, “It’s nice when you don’t have to walk over to the shelf and get a reference book – you can just use your education. The writer’s on the show are a bunch of eggheads.” Bart might as well have said, “Eat my book.”

For more information on The Simpsons unexpected mathematical genius, visit www.simpsonsmath.com.

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