



Max Beberman

Mathematics Educator Award

Max Beberman



EXCEPTIONAL
TEACHER
OF MATHEMATICS

Max Beberman (1925 –1971) began his career in the early 1950's, as a young math instructor at the University of Illinois' Laboratory School (Uni High). Dissatisfied with current teaching practices, he began to create innovative curriculum materials for the classes he was teaching. In 1957, in response to the launching of Sputnik, the Federal Government initiated a massive national program to improve the quality of math and science instruction in the United States. In particular, NSF launched several well-funded national curriculum projects, including Max's University of Illinois Committee on School Mathematics (UICSM). In the course of the next two decades, UICSM became one of the most influential and admired curriculum projects in the U.S., and Max became one of the towering figures in math education—not only in the U.S., but all over the world.

Max was passionate and unwavering in his efforts to bring good (or, as he liked to say) honest mathematic to all students. Under Max's direction, UICSM produced a slew of middle and high school curriculum materials based on a number of basic principles, including the following:

- Max's believed that the school math curriculum should emphasize conceptual understanding and ideas, rather than the rote memorization of mindless procedures and mathematical facts.
- Max believed that the creation of good curriculum materials was much too important to be left to commercial textbook publishers. So, he established UICSM as a home where teams of experienced teachers, math educators, and professional mathematicians could work together to create new school math curriculum materials.
- In order to preserve the integrity of the mathematics, Max insisted that research mathematicians be centrally involved in all UICSM curriculum projects. He also believed that experienced classroom teachers had a vital role to play in curriculum development.
- Max recognized early on that the success of math education reform depended on teachers being familiar and comfortable with the mathematics they were asked to teach. Over the years he developed a nation-wide summer institute program that trained hundreds of teachers.
- Max developed the method of "guided discovery," which encouraged students to discover some mathematical ideas and principles for themselves
- Max believed that language played an important role in the in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Without a proper language in which to ask and answer questions, mathematics could easily degenerate into training students to give rote responses to trivial exam questions.

Beyond all this, Max was a larger than life personality. His students, as well as the teachers in his institutes, adored him. His love of mathematics was palpable. He projected an almost childlike love of learning. He lived life to the fullest. He was the father of nine children, one of whom shared this story with us.

When I was six my father was taking my brother to New York to visit his father who would soon die. I didn't understand why I couldn't go and my father tried to put me off by saying, "I'll take you when you are as old as John." I didn't waste a second and declared, "I'll never be as old as John. Whenever I have a birthday, he has one later and I'll never catch up." That Guided Discovery got me included in the trip!

- Thoughts by Peter Braunfeld, a previous Beberman Award Winner