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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2003 ♦ PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIFORNIA

Local Math Whiz Helps Kids in Need

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Few teenagers can fill a conversation quite like Palisadian Amy Unterman. The 18-year-old, a senior at Concord High School in Santa Monica, chats about multivariable calculus, stuffed animals, and Presidential candidate Dick Gephardt—all within the course of an hour. When it comes to these topics, she's not just waxing poetic—Amy has taken a calculus class at Harvard, runs her own nonprofit charity organization, Friends By Your Side, which collects dolls and distributes them to disadvantaged children around Los Angeles, and interns at Gephardt's local campaign headquarters.

A straight-A student at Concord, Unterman has scored a five (the highest score) on the national end-of-term exam for every Advanced Placement course she's taken. Her favorite classes have been those dealing with numbers. "I've taken everything, including calculus and calculus-based physics," she says. "I just love math... Concord is the first school where I have teachers who are really into it." The numbers game began at Santa Monica's Lincoln Middle School, where her teacher had a "100 Percent Club," which rewarded students who received perfect scores on weekly math tests. "My name was the only one that stayed on the wall the whole year," she says. "After that, I tried to hide from my 'math nerdness.'" Once she got to high school, however, there was no hiding.

After Unterman had completed every advanced math course that Concord offered, principal Susan Packer Davis-Hille encouraged her to look further—and a top Ivy League institution seemed just the place. "I was looking on Harvard's Website and found information about a summer program for high school students," Amy says. Accepted as one of a select group of teenagers, she spent two months this summer in Massachusetts, "loving Boston" and taking two undergraduate courses, Multivariable Calculus and Law and Psychology. Sharing classrooms with Harvard graduate students and top academics from around the world,



Concord High School senior Amy Unterman.

Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

she earned an "A" in both.

Returning to L.A. earlier this month, Unterman redirected her attention, from Einstein and the criminal justice system to Friends by Your Side. She started Friends three years ago, after visiting the Los Angeles Public Counsel with her father. At the Counsel, which provides free legal aid to those in need, she observed underprivileged kids. Coupled with her lifelong love of sewing dolls' clothes, this glimpse into the lives of the disadvantaged gave Unterman her charitable idea.

"A lot of kids get to shelters and safehouses, and they have nothing," she says. "I started collecting old dolls and teddy bears, fixing them up, and giving them to organizations like the Sojourn

internship. In March, Unterman and her parents attended a luncheon at which Congressman Dick Gephardt was the keynote speaker. "He talked about how young people needed to be more involved," Amy says of the House Democratic leader. Inspired by the speech, the gutsy, articulate teenager introduced herself to Gephardt and told him she wanted to be of service. He, in turn, offered her an internship at his Los Angeles campaign headquarters. "Since May, I've worked there three times a week, four hours per day," she says. "I file, make phone calls, and work alongside Gephardt's staffers... it's cool to see how the [political] process works."

Blonde and bubbly, Amy has an enthusiasm for life that is infectious. It's a sunny attitude passed down from parents Tom, a venture capitalist, and Janet, a homemaker who does volunteer work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (Older sister Becky, a Northwestern graduate, is a public high school teacher in Chicago.) The Untermans, who share their Amalfi home with dogs Jewel and Gus, also own a house in Carpinteria, just south of Santa Barbara, where athletic Amy enjoys surfing and soaking up the sun.

While "senioritis" will soon hit most of her classmates, Unterman is gearing up for her most academically challenging year to date. In addition to taking two Advanced Placement French courses at Concord, she will be enrolling in a four-times-weekly morning math class at UCLA, driving to Concord afterwards to finish out the school day. In addition, she's planning to take a course in electricity/magnetism physics, either at UCLA or Santa Monica College. All of this, she hopes, will lead to her study of mathematics at a top-drawer university next fall. "No matter what, I know I'll do well and have a great time wherever I go," she says. A tall order, which—after multivariable calculus—should be as easy as 1-2-3.

House in Santa Monica, a home for battered women and children." Soon after Friends's founding, an article about Unterman appeared on the company Web site of Jo-Ann's Fabrics; the publicity resulted in a network of avid sewers who provide Amy with doll clothes. She estimates that she distributes between 200 and 300 toys per year, "to places like the children's ward at King-Drew Hospital, the South Central youth drop-in center A Place Called Home, and Winners on Wheels, a Long Beach-based organization which supports wheelchair-bound kids and their families... I love seeing the looks on their faces. It makes it all worth it."

This past year, she embarked on a new journey—a political