

Alex Kajitani

Math Gets a Good Rap with Creative Teacher

Alex Kajitani had traveled the world, worked in the fast-paced restaurant industry and earned an advanced degree, but he was about to face his toughest challenge yet—teaching algebra to a classroom of middle school students.



Photo: Sam Wells

The Irvine native always knew he eventually wanted to teach, but first he spent his 20s traveling around the world and managing a seafood restaurant in Santa Barbara to get some life experience under his belt after earning a bachelor's degree. He then moved to San Diego to get his master's degree and teaching credential at San Diego State University, and began teaching middle school math at a San Diego school seven years ago. He was in for a shock.

"Teaching was different than I expected," he says. "I expected all the students to be up to grade level and excited about being in my class and know how to be well behaved. I had to adjust to reality very quickly."

He had a hard time keeping kids on task. "They couldn't recite the math rules we had just learned the day before, but any time there was a new rap song out, the next day they had every single word memorized."

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By Louise Julig

A rap fan himself, Kajitani had grown discouraged at the direction the genre was taking. He wanted to offer kids an alternative message in the music they loved, and grew inspired to write a rap about a math concept. He performed it in class using an alter ego, The Rappin' Mathematician.

The song, "The Itty Bitty Dot," about adding and subtracting decimal numbers, didn't get the response he expected. "It was a disaster. The kids were laughing at me; they were falling out of their chairs. But at lunchtime I heard some of them rapping the song. The next day when the kids came to class they were all excited; some of them said it was the best day they had ever had in school."

Although they were laughing, they were also learning, so Kajitani continued to write and perform as The Rappin' Mathematician, or TRM. Then other teachers heard about the songs, and he was constantly being told he should record them for other teachers to use.

Thus was born MathRaps, the company he runs with his wife, Megan, that has so far released two CDs and a workbook that have sold all over the world. Kajitani also travels the nation giving workshops and presentations on "Making Math Cool."

Two years after he started teaching, Kajitani and his wife moved to Carlsbad to start a family. "Carlsbad was a natural, wonderful choice," says Kajitani, who now teaches at Mission Middle School in Escondido. "I do a lot of surfing and wanted to be near the water."

Kajitani's enthusiasm and innovative methods have earned him many accolades, including the 2009 California Teacher of the Year award and a slot as one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. Future plans for MathRaps include more recordings and videos (two produced by the Mission Middle School Video Club have earned Innovative Video in Education Awards) and possibly an animated TV show. And of course, The Rappin' Mathematician will keep on solving for X. •

Find The Rappin' Mathematician at
www.mathraps.com and
www.youtube.com/user/MathRaps.



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