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**A full-circle solution****Math alumna returns to campus to teach this fall**

Written by UW-La Crosse University Marketing & Communications

Every couple years, a teacher meets a student who reminds them why they love the job — someone eager to “geek out” over complex, seemingly unsolvable problems, who shows up to office hours hungry for more, and who dives into tutoring and clubs to keep the conversations going.

For UWL Mathematics faculty members Eddie Kim and Whitney George, that student was Kelly (Emmrich) O’Connor.

During her undergraduate years at UWL, O’Connor made a lasting impression. She was deeply curious, relentlessly motivated and passionate about math in a way that energized people around her. After graduating, she pursued her master’s and doctoral degrees in mathematics and taught at the collegiate level. Now, she’s coming back.

Starting this fall, O’Connor will join the [UWL Mathematics & Statistics Department](https://www.uwlax.edu/academics/department/mathematics-and-statistics/) as a faculty member.

“Kelly was that student you really got to share your passion with,” says George. “We had her here for four years. Now, hopefully, we’ll get her for the rest of her career.”

Returning to UWL feels like a homecoming for O’Connor. After her on-campus interview in February, she was overwhelmed with emotion.

“I was in tears on my way home — happy ones!” she says. “All the folks who meant so much to me were still there. It felt really good. It felt like going back home.”

**A love for math (and teaching it)**

O’Connor’s love of mathematics was sparked early in her UWL journey, during one of her first courses taught by George.

“There were definitive reasons why the math concepts we were learning worked. That captivated me. It was beautiful,” says O’Connor. “I loved knowing something was true for a reason — that you could write it down or draw a picture of it.”

Inspired by this new sense of clarity and wonder, O’Connor changed her major to [mathematics](https://www.uwlax.edu/academics/mathematics/) and soon began tutoring. She discovered she loved teaching just as much as learning.

Over time, she encountered students who didn’t share her natural enthusiasm for the subject — students who felt overwhelmed or defeated when the material didn’t click. But when they experienced a breakthrough, their faces lit up. That moment, she says, remains her favorite part of teaching.

“I love that confidence it gives you… It feels good when you understand something,” she says. “I love that feeling myself, and it’s fun to watch it in others. Little by little, you can change the narrative people have about math.”

**Advocating for women in math**

O’Connor became particularly passionate about changing that narrative for girls and women in mathematics. That advocacy took root after she started attending national mathematics conferences as an undergraduate including one at Northwestern University and another at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton between her junior and senior years at UWL.

Before these experiences, O’Connor hadn’t thought much about gender disparities in math. Her mother — a middle school math teacher — had been her biggest math role model. Hearing stories from women at other institutions opened her eyes.

“Hearing others’ stories about being women in math at other colleges and departments lit a fire in her,” George recalls. “It was cool to see her come to realizations about what it meant to advocate for women in mathematics.”

In graduate school at Colorado State University, O’Connor turned that fire into action. She and several fellow students organized CSU’s first Sonia Kovalevsky Day, a national initiative designed to encourage young women to pursue math. The event featured talks and hands-on workshops led by graduate students. O’Connor is grateful for the support of her outreach work as a CSU student from Professor Rachel Pries, her graduate advisor.

The first event drew 100 high school students from the region. Even more attended the following year.

“It was so cool because I grew up in rural Wisconsin, and we never had the opportunity to attend something like this,” O’Connor says. “You look at your former self and ask, What would have helped me realize this passion for math earlier? That keeps you grounded and reminds you what’s important.”

She went on to lead a session at a similar event at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, her first faculty position. At UWL, she hopes to launch new programming for women in math and revive the Women and Minorities in Mathematics group she helped establish as a student.

**A supportive start**

O’Connor says the culture of support at UWL played a crucial role in shaping both her passion and her teaching philosophy.

She recalls a moment after a linear algebra class when she had a question but couldn’t find her instructor. Professor Kim poked his head out of his office and invited her to ask him instead.

“That kind of community — professors who were always willing to help — was consistent throughout my time here,” she says.

One standout memory was sitting in Professor Tushar Das’ office while planning her course schedule. One by one, other mathematics faculty members crowded around in the small office and joined the conversation, offering advice on classes to not only help her get into graduate school — but to thrive once she got there.

“They were all invested. They all cared about what I was going to do,” she says. “And I know I wasn’t the only student who had that kind of attention.”

Faculty say that O’Connor earned that support with her drive and genuine curiosity about math and her future.

“There are students who take math because they have to, and then there are students who take it because they love it,” Kim says. “It comes through in the tone of their questions and the kind of questions they ask."

**More than a student**

O’Connor’s approach to teaching today is deeply influenced by her UWL relationships. She makes an effort to know her students personally — not just their grades or assignments, but their interests and goals.

“Students can tell when you care about them as a whole person,” she says. “You’re not just going through the motions so they learn calculus and move on. That care was shown to me in a lot of ways at UWL.”

That sense of connection runs both ways. Kim recalls finding a cheap flight to Panama City on the same day as UWL’s graduation ceremony when O’Connor would walk the stage.

“She came to my office and said, ‘Would you reconsider?’” Kim remembers. “And I did. I moved the flight.”

What convinced him wasn’t just her request — it was who she was.

“One of the coolest things about Kelly is how much these emotional, sentimental things matter,” Kim says. “She doesn’t think of you as someone to just get information from and move on. You’re growing together as people who care about each other.”

Years later, when O’Connor got married in Fort Collins, Colorado, she invited her UWL mentors to the wedding. Kim accepted without hesitation.

“I thought… yes, let’s go,” he says. “She’s meant something to me in my time and career here as a mathematician. Someone you want to stay connected with forever. She’s not the only one — but Kelly is at the top of that list.”

George says she's looking forward to welcoming O’Connor not just back to UWL, but back as a colleague.

“It’s going to be plain fun to watch her redefine her relationships with past professors and build meaningful ones with our students,” she says.