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From the March for Science: Do the Math

by Pia de Jong

"What will my child's world look like in 30 years?" That's the resonant question asked by a speaker at the Mall in Washington at last weekend's March for Science. She is under a roof. I'm not, and I am drenched. I look around. A girl is wearing a blue poncho on which is written, I wear this because science told me it was going to rain today. Next to me stands a man holding a hand-scrawled sign: Keep the oceans clean. On his chest, wrapped in a yellow towel, a baby licks the rain off his lips.

I do the math. In 30 years I will be as old as my mom is right now. I will be happy if I can get there and my health is as good as hers is. By then my eldest child will be as old as I am. In what kind of world will we be living?

I'm talking to a young ophthalmologist from India. He tells me he will spend this summer in Africa volunteering to treat children with eye problems with the latest medical techniques. His idealism is contagious.

A skinny girl climbs carefully over a spiked fence to pick up a discarded plastic water bottle. Around her waist she has tied a garbage bag. Trash Travels is emblazoned on her T-shirt. She has a degree in linguistics, she tells me, and speaks Arabic, Portuguese, and Mandarin, as well as her native language, German, but she believes she can offer the world more by speaking out about the environment. "It's the biggest challenge of our time."

The atmosphere in Washington on this drizzly day is surprisingly upbeat. Despite the rain and dark clouds, the sun of reason is shining, thanks to these people with their T-shirts and saucy banners. It is a comforting thought that, under the shadow of the present White House, so many people have responded with optimism and energy.

I'm here not just for the march, but also for a math festival, which is held a few blocks from the mall, happily indoors. While it's still raining outside, I walk to a dry and cheerful room. It is remarkably quiet, despite the fact that there are certainly hundreds of children between ages 6 and 10 sitting at long tables. All of them have wooden blocks, with which they are trying with supreme concentration to construct geometric shapes. A girl with dreadlocks leaps up when she completes one for the first time. Her brother looks admiringly at her.

In the other rooms children play chess, walk around in robot figures made of balloons, and solve mathematical riddles that I would not know. This is the world of people who love numbers, are captivated by patterns, and lose themselves in solving complex puzzles. In a lecture about black holes, a group of eight-year-olds asks one smart question after another. When an adult cautiously explains his own theory, I see the kids looking at each other and slapping hands.

Give these young scientists enough space and time, in 30 years we will understand black holes, have fresh air and clean water, and all live to see our 100th birthdays. It's going to be all well with the world.

Pia de Jong traveled to Washington with a contingent of scientists from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, including her husband, Robbert Dijkgraaf, who spoke at the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute (MSRI). Send comments to pdejong@ias.edu.

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