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Recommended Citation

Emille Lawrence, "Super Mamas: A Real Life Story of Everyday Super Heroes," *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 8 Issue 2 (July 2018), pages 292-299. DOI: 10.5642/jhummath.201802.33.
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol8/iss2/33>

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Super Mamas: A Real Life Story of Everyday Super Heroes¹

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Synopsis

Bridging the gap between the world of motherhood and the world of academia can seem like a heroic feat. This essay acknowledges and celebrates a community of super women doing this every day. The Math Mamas Facebook group was formed in 2016 and today boasts over five hundred members. It provides its members a platform to commiserate about the challenges and celebrate the wins, big or small, whichever is appropriate whenever.

Summer is upon us. With it comes backyard barbecues, water slides, sleeping under the stars, and maybe even finding time to catch the newest summer blockbuster. Every summer we settle into our seats in a dark theater to watch the super heroes du jour fly at top speeds with other caped crusaders, overturning cars, stopping trains with their bare hands, and defeating the evil villains, no matter the odds. And, of course, we can't forget the explosions, explosions, and more EXPLOSIONS!

We know these storylines well, and every year they seem to get wilder and more over the top than the previous year. Entertaining? You bet! Every summer these movies rake in hundreds of millions of dollars. Some people go to midnight screenings on opening day or camp out over night to be first in line to see their favorite super hero movie.

But I've got a secret. I, too, am a super hero. By day, I am known as "Professor Lawrence", a mathematics professor extraordinaire who teaches three courses every semester at the University of San Francisco while also

¹Thank you to all the Math Mamas out there who inspire me every day.

serving the mathematics community at large and continuing the mathematics research that I love. This year alone I taught Calculus, Topology, and Combinatorics; took six trips to meet with collaborators; started an AWM student chapter; and co-organized a regional arm of a national conference. But at 5pm everyday, I shapeshift. In the evening, I am known to my two children as “Mommy”, a chauffeur, short-order cook, kisser of boo-boos, and nighttime story reader.

The author and her family, November 2017. Photo by Carolyn Soling of Soling Photography, printed with her permission.

The dual identities that I juggle are not unlike the identities Clark Kent and Superman or Bruce Wayne and Batman. However, I would argue that I am expected to be super in both of my roles—not just one (take that, Bruce Wayne!). At work, I am expected to perform as though I don’t have another full-time job to start in the evening, and at home my family expects and deserves my full attention, as well. But because there are only twenty-four hours in a day, my life as a super hero sometimes gets messy. Each identity invades the space of the other. In the middle of office hours, I may have

to stop my explanation of the importance of generating functions to sign-up online for the 3 year old summer soccer league (which always fills up in a matter of minutes). Or I may have to pass on the Sunday family trip to the park because I have too much work to finish before Monday. But you know what? It is the negotiation of the responsibilities of both of my roles that makes me feel super. Do I handle this perfectly? Nope. Some days I feel as though I'm failing on all fronts, but I'm getting better at beating back those feeling and showing myself a little grace. Because the truth is, I'm pretty awesome. It took me quite a while to say things like that out loud without feeling uncomfortable, but small celebrations of oneself can be food for the soul.

Of course, I am not alone. There is an entire legion of phenomenal women who are kicking butt and taking names in the mathematics world and in raising their children. These super women are your colleagues, co-members of service committees, or perhaps casual acquaintances at meetings. Make no mistake, they are everywhere you turn—quietly juggling the responsibilities of a modern woman in mathematics.

How do I know, you ask? Because about six hundred of them are members of the Facebook group Math Mamas.

It was January 2016. My children were ages two and a half and 10 months, and needless to say, I was generally exhausted—mentally and physically. The idea for the group came to me the way many of my better ideas do—while I was in the shower. This particular shower idea was spawned from the feeling that there must be other women like me who are math professionals and mothers seeking a community to share life experiences which are quite specific to both of those worlds. That very day, I set up the group and invited all of my Facebook contacts that I thought would be interested. Within hours, those people invited others to the group and those others invited more still. Every person that joined introduced themselves to the group by giving their professional affiliation along with a photo of their children. I watched the group grow and grow as people excitedly introduced themselves and expressed their delight that there was finally a “place for us”. By the powers of exponential growth, at the end of the day there were already over a hundred members, and I knew I had tapped into something special. Indeed, there were others like me needing to connect, to belong, to share.

Some Math Mamas at the Joint Mathematics Meetings in Atlanta, USA (January 2017). Photo by Rachel Levy, printed with her permission.

Here we are now more than two years and approximately five hundred more members later—a Squadron Supreme of magnificent moms, one might say. We are mothers of varying ages, ethnic backgrounds, and academic ranks. However, what we all have in common is our love for mathematics and our desire to advance science while mothering our children. In the group we ask for advice, share triumphs both professional and personal, and rally behind one another. One member said of the group:

“I think this group is a good example of a horizontal mentoring network where we may all be at different phases in our careers and in motherhood, yet we all contribute to the mentoring relationship.”

Another member said:

“I think about this group as a community where I really belong to!!!! I wouldn’t mind making it known to the whole math community.”

We offer each other advice on textbooks and best teaching practices. We give each other suggestions on math games for our young kids. Recently, there have been math mamas posting photos of their kids at graduation ceremonies.

One member's daughter just graduated from a PhD program in math (perhaps in a few years, there will be second generation math mamas in the group). Another had a son on his way to a math PhD program.

Math Mama Catherine Roberts sharing a photo of her son Ben at his college graduation (May 22, 2018), printed here with their permission.

We share loads of mentoring advice. Not long ago, a post asking for “the best mentoring advice you ever received” garnered 134 comments. One of my personal favorites was: “If you have 7 minutes to think about your research, then think about research.”

We also share articles, job postings, facts, opinions, and everything in between. Some discussion threads, for example, have brought up the many challenges of the Math Mamas to the fore. Months of sleepless nights breast-feeding and co-sleeping can make even the sharpest of minds feel foggy and slow. As a result, teaching evaluations could take a dip after returning from maternity leave. Add this to the research that shows that female instructors are already at a disadvantage in the classroom, and you get a whole lot of concern about teaching. Teaching ideas and teaching evaluations have thus been regular topics in the group.

Math Mama Katie Paullin sharing a photo of her son Liam (May 27, 2018), printed here with her permission.

Other group discussions reflect the fact that things that were once a non-issue, like attending a conference, can, after the arrival of a baby or two, turn into an ordeal of hand-wringing (“Should I take the baby? Leave the baby? Skip the conference all together? If I go, will I be able to think despite being exhausted? Will my kids be okay without mom for a while?”) followed by intense planning (“Where will I nurse? What will be my childcare options?”).

Where can I store pumped milk? Who will do school pick up and drop off in my absence?”). Having to say no to being on that committee that meets at 5pm could also have a negative career effect. Math Mamas at all stages of life contribute to related discussions about managing departmental and institutional expectations of service. Through such discussions and others, Math Mamas are working to mitigate the various professional penalties that can come along with the choice of motherhood.

The super women that I know are handling all of these challenges and many more, and they are not asking necessarily for any special fanfare or praise. Nonetheless there should be some room for recognition, and it would not hurt to acknowledge these superhuman achievements. Furthermore many others can empathize with, learn from, and be inspired by these women.

That is why Pamela Harris, Carrie Eaton, Becky Hall, and I wanted to dedicate this special issue of *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics* to the unsung super heroes that walk amongst us every day. We wanted to give a platform of empowerment and encouragement to the community of Math Mamas who are faster than a speeding bullet, stronger than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Emille Davie Lawrence, Carrie Diaz Eaton, and Pamela Harris at the Joint Mathematics Meetings (January 2018) in San Diego, USA. Photo used with permission.

There will also be a Town Hall Meeting at the 2018 MathFest, the annual summer meeting of the Mathematical Association of America, called “Mathematical Mamas—Being Both Beautifully” organized by Jacqueline Jensen-Vallin, Erin Militzer, and myself. In this town hall, we will celebrate victories and propose solutions to the challenges that can arise from bridging the world of parenthood and the world of academia.

So, save yourself the price of a movie ticket this summer. A real life wonder woman could be closer than you think. She may not be wearing a cape or mask, but she is a hero just the same.

Are you a Math Mama, too? How can you join us? Right now, entry into the group is by invitation from a current group member; this is due to the prevalence of trolls on Facebook. But the chances are, you already know someone in the group, so if you’d like entry just ask them to add you (and if you’re already in the group, don’t forget to keep adding new mamas!).