

Whiz Kid

Testing the limits of Will power, a teen academic prodigy tries to remain just a kid

BY JESSICA GIANNONE

Not many students graduate from high school and college in the same month, but this spring Will Sawin did just that, earning diplomas from Fairfield Warde High School and Yale.

Will Sawin is pretty much your average 17-year-old: tall, skinny, short brown hair, bold brown eyes and defined eyebrows. He has a boyish demeanor, accompanied by a dynamic tone of voice and quick pace of speech.

Will just graduated from Fairfield Warde High School. Like most teenagers, he is still figuring out what he wants to do with his life. He has an older sister in college and a younger brother in high school. He enjoys karate and playing the collectible card game Magic. In his spare time he likes to read blogs and goof around with friends his age. Also like most kids, he admits he procrastinates from time to time.

Just one thing sets him apart from other 17-year olds: In the same month Will Sawin graduated from high school, he also graduated from college. That college was Yale, where he double-majored in math and economics.

In September he will attend grad school at Princeton, concentrating in mathematics.

Will attended his first Yale class (discrete math) at age nine, auditing it after he and his mother spoke to the professor of the course. His mother says it helped that Will knew another Yale professor to vouch for his intellectual ability. Will enrolled at Yale as a non-degree student as a ten-year-old fifth-grader, and moved on to Yale's Eli Whitney program for "non-traditional" students (most of whom are older than typical undergrads) at age 14.

It took two attempts before he was accepted into the Eli Whitney program as a part-time student.

Will and his parents discussed the possibility of Will entering a Yale degree program. He underwent the same process as any other applicant, but also took the SAT and AP tests (not required of other Eli Whitney applicants), which may have been positive factors in his admission.

Will says that over the year that elapsed from the first to the final time he applied, he had more time to mature and gain a broader range of knowledge. He had already been taking Yale classes, and with

more experience under his academic belt, it became clear he was up to the challenge. Will was too young for the regular degree program, but not too young to learn.



Will Sawin's unusual academic aptitude became evident early in his life.

"I feel like this is one of those things in which confidence comes with ability," he says. "When I was seven and reading books, they were telling me how awesome I was."

Will has always had a strong aptitude for math. His mother Lisa recalls when second-grader Will began reading her college differential equations math book, which she acknowledges was difficult for her to apprehend even as a college sophomore.

His parents attribute Will's abilities to both nature and nurture. Lisa Sawin holds a math degree from Penn State, while

father Stephen, a mathematics professor at Fairfield University, is a Princeton grad.

Lisa Sawin says she thinks her son's strong academic capabilities are a combination of natural aptitude, not unlike a person who can play a musical instrument.

"He has an intuition for the next subject," Lisa says, referring to the fact that Will knows how to effectively grasp the next concept in logical order.

Will's mother says she and her husband never attempted to teach their children math, but one thing she takes credit for in terms of nurture is how smart her offspring "feel" they are. She says the elder Sawins always read a lot to their kids, and talked about math and science. Lisa refers to Will's math prowess as a "gift from biology," an aptitude bestowed on her son by Mother Nature.

Growing up in an enriched intellectual environment, Will was ahead of his peers academically, but was treated no different by his fellow classmates. But different he was — Will started tackling high school classes when he was eight years old.

Thomas Pesce, principal of Stratfield Elementary School in Will's hometown of Fairfield, says the young prodigy played with and related to the other students, although it was evident early on that Will's intellectual abilities were out of the ordinary.

"He was so bright and ahead of children in so many things that he did," says Pesce. "He was kind of on his own plane."

After Lisa brought Will's abilities to the elementary school's attention, the teachers there worked with him to make sure he had the academic basics, then proceeded based on what would benefit Will's learning the most. Pesce recalls that the school had a special teacher work with him because of how accelerated he was.

"He was always an out-of-the-box thinker," says Pesce. "He was very perceptive. He saw things differently. He was extremely bright. He especially found math so easy — he was so intuitive with it."

Jim D'Acosta, Will's Cub Scoutmaster in elementary school, who has known the Sawins for ten years, says when Will was young, everyone — adults and students alike — became protective of him.

Lisa Sawin says there were always people in Will's life he liked to talk to (such as college professors Will liked to chat with on visits to Yale with his mother), which fueled his enthusiasm. By the third

grade, Will was meeting every other week with a professor at Yale, after the district math curriculum leader arranged for a introductory lunch.

Many of his early teachers influenced him heavily. Lisa Sawin says they taught him how to "just be a kid," which would prove a valuable gift.

Lisa Sawin says her son's unusual abilities became apparent as early as the first grade, when Will began to read science books cover to cover.

"It became clear to me very rapidly that he was understanding it at a much deeper level than I was," she says. "It took a few years for us to realize we were going to be continually surprised."

Thus began a lifetime of the elder Sawins looking at each other and exclaiming, "Oh, my God — did he really just do that?" Even so, "We just tried to be very matter-of-fact about it," recalls Will's mother, trying to treat Will's smarts simply as a trait, like being tall or funny. "Just to make it be not such a big deal."



Despite his obvious gifts, Will says he has never felt a great deal of external pressure to achieve academically. He characterizes himself as more internally driven.

Will says he's not intimidated by the college environment, but he thinks other students may sometimes be intimidated by him.

Maybe it's the fact that he has such a keen memory (he rarely needs to take notes in class) or that his work on problem sets is effortless. "I need less information in math than other people do," Will explains.

Tobias Dyckerhoff, a post-doc teaching fellow in algebraic geometry at Yale, says Will stood out in class as a highly motivated and engaged student. He says his advanced math class is typically regarded as quite demanding by most students. Will, however, demonstrated "exceptional talent" compared to other students.

Dyckerhoff adds that the young Sawin got along well with his older classmates.

"I wouldn't even have noticed his young age," says Dyckerhoff. "It once just came up randomly in a class conversation."

As far as his social life goes, Will says the biggest challenge has been

that, by splitting his time between high school and college, he never felt like a

full-time member of either. Still, he says he has no regrets, and is proud of his academic achievements.

Although Will has gotten better at skills such as writing and organization (which he acknowledges weren't initially strengths) his thirst for knowledge remains unquenched. He describes math as "what's cool, what's elegant, what's beautiful."

"I may or may not have more or less broad brain power," he says. "It's just so hard to measure."

Fairfield Warde Headmaster Jim Coyne says that during his years at Warde, Will has probably undergone a greater physical change, if anything.

"He has been here before a lot of [the current staff was hired, taking high school classes while still in elementary school]," Coyne jokes, as he praises Will's ability to handle such a heavy workload at such a tender age.

Will's Introduction to Fiction Writing professor at Yale this spring, John Crowley, says recalls how Will's demeanor and class comments were unlike any other student's.

"His way of twisting himself around in his chair with nearly a contortionist's complexity as he worked out a thought was fascinating to watch," Crowley says.

After he enrolls at graduate school at Princeton this fall, Will says he hopes to begin figuring out what he wants to do with his life beyond the classroom. He says he wants to turn into someone capable of achieving in the "real world," and graduate school seems like the best step for now.

Like any parent, Lisa Sawin worries that her "watchful eyes" as a mother won't be on Will after he leaves home, making sure he washes his sheets, goes to bed at a reasonable hour and turns off the lights.

"I turn off the lights," Will retorts.

Whatever Will ends up doing with his life, his mother stresses that being happy is the most important thing for her prodigious offspring.

Will has covered just about everything between Pull-Ups to Princeton in 17 brief years. Some might say his "super smarts" are a result of learning, or they could be just another blessing from Mother Nature. Others may simply call it Will power.