Math whiz meeting President Bush today

BY GINA VASSELLI
The Express-Times

Ben Kraft was 6 when he learned how to do factorials.
He taught himself multiplication and division when he was in kindergarten.
"I'm just one of those crazy people who find it fun to do math," Ben said.

Ben, 14, placed second last month at the Mathcounts National Competition in Fort Worth, Texas. Besides a $6,000 scholarship, it earned him and other top finishers the chance to meet with President Bush today.

But Ben is more concerned with the other math contest he's competing in, the American Regions Math League. The league is designed for high school students, but Ben, an eighth-grader, joined the team last year. The competition is scheduled to run this weekend at Penn State University.

Ben's mother, Margot Hillman, thinks it's the problem-solving aspect of math that keeps him interested.
"If you think of it as puzzles, it makes a lot more sense," Hillman said.

But he doesn't know why he likes it.
"It's a lot of fun. All these contests are just a lot of fun," Ben said. "I'm sure I wouldn't like it if it was really hard though."

Ben takes ninth-grade math classes at Moravian Academy's Upper School. He is also taking a summer class on linear algebra at Lafayette College.

Ben has been a year ahead in math since sixth grade.
"That was when we realized he wasn't being challenged," Hillman said.
Around that same time, Ben started doing Mathcounts.

Mathcounts coach and Moravian Academy eighth-grade math teacher Alison Overdorf said Ben was a great resource for the team and in class.
Overdorf taught Ben when he was in seventh grade and said he's "phenomenal."
"It's great to have someone in class who loves the subject as much as you do," Overdorf said.

Overdorf said Ben's love of the subject is evident, especially when he's on stage during the competitions.
"He was smiling, and he was just so happy to be there," Overdorf said.

Hillman said that when they gathered the family together on Sundays, Ben would ask his family to tell stories. But the stories were actually just simple word problems, and the goal was to have Ben figure out the answer.

Hillman said both she and her husband, Steve Kraft, who works in The Express-Times' information technology department, are good at math. But, "Ben is starting to get ahead," she said.

"Sometimes it's kind of like, 'Oh my God, you're in eighth-grade,'" Hillman said.
But she said she is glad for all the doors that math competitions have opened for her son — such as a chance to meet the president in chief.
"How many people get to meet the president in their whole life?" she said.

Rendell goes on trade mission

HARRISBURG | Gov. Ed Rendell visited Madrid, Spain, on Thursday, the first stop in a European trip aimed at promoting Pennsylvania trade.

The governor also plans to visit the United Kingdom before returning to Pennsylvania on Tuesday, his office said.

The Democrat's first international trade mission includes meetings through Saturday in Madrid, a stop in Bilbao, Spain, and then a visit to London, where he will meet with the American ambassador and British business representatives.

Pennsylvania Environmental Protection Secretary Kathleen McGinty is with Rendell in Spain then will meet with officials from North-Rhine Westphalia in Germany to discuss renewable-energy projects and biotechnology innovations.