CLASS ACT: 9-Year-Old Gets Jump-Start on Lifelong Learning at Texas A&M

COLLEGE STATION -- When it comes to explaining cosmology and other dynamics of the Universe, Dr. David Toback can hold his own. As an associate professor of physics and Thaman Professor of Undergraduate Teaching Excellence at Texas A&M University who specializes in high energy physics, he rarely finds himself at a loss for words when answering questions from students during one of his lectures, especially when that student is only nine years old.

Adam Atanas is his name, and physics is his passion. While most kids Adam's age would be more enthralled by toys or video games, this unique Houston youngster can be found most Wednesday afternoons in a Texas A&M classroom attending Toback's Physics 289: Intro to Cosmology course -- by his own request. Adam's mother, Katya, makes the weekly trip to campus just so her son can sit in on Toback's class, something which has proven to be a real treat for both student and instructor.

"Adam Atanas is a special kid, and it's easy to forget that he's only nine years old," Toback explains. "He just opens his mouth, and it's just stunning what comes out."

Toback first encountered Adam in January while delivering a guest lecture on the Universe and the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) as part of Texas A&M's Saturday Morning Physics (SMP) Program, led by fellow physics professor Dr. Ralph Rapp. After his presentation, Toback was taking questions from the audience, when the boy stunned him with a question about how stars were affected by the deuterium process.

After meeting with Adam at the end of the lecture, Toback realized this was no ordinary kid and invited him to sit in during his regular semester course lectures.

"To have a child his age asking questions such as these is incredible," Toback notes. "This kid has all of the tools to be a world-class scientist one day, and he needs a mentor. He just has to be nurtured, and his mother has been doing a wonderful job of encouraging him with something he enjoys learning about."

Katya says Adam's fascination with physics began with a love of mathematics, one of his favorite subjects in school. From there, his interest escalated to particle physics, a lot of which had to do with Toback's lectures, she notes. The Atanases have attended the Saturday Morning Physics lectures for the past three years, and Adam has also participated in Texas A&M's annual Chemistry Open House since he was four.

"Most kids spend their allowance on games or toys, but Adam spends his on lectures and documentaries," Katya says. "He can't wait to officially become a student here. Dr. Toback has been so nice about Adam coming to class. Adam just loves it."

Adam has had no trouble adjusting to the college environment at such an early age, although he does not participate in examinations because he is not officially enrolled in the course.
A&M's Saturday Morning Physics Program, which introduced him to Dr. David Toback this past January.