Congratulations to Dr. Robert Jantzen on 40 Years of Teaching at Villanova!

Can you tell us about your background and where you earned your degrees?
I grew up in a working class family doing construction jobs summers with my dad in a tiny rural NY State village, then got my AB in physics at Princeton University and PhD in theoretical physics from U Cal Berkeley while wearing my hair in a ponytail, and then went on to do postdocs in Chapel Hill, Rome, Munich and Cambridge (MA) before settling down here. Meanwhile I was lucky to have a working relationship with the International Center for Relativistic Astrophysics at the University of Rome La Sapienza for over 4 decades giving me a parallel second life as a part time American ex-pat in Rome.

What was the first class you taught at Villanova? Can you provide a look back in time and describe the times in the 1980s/early 1990s?
I started with MAT1500, my first teaching experience, and quickly realized I needed to aim more for where Villanova students were, expanding to teach the entire sequence of Calc and DE with LinAlg courses and Linear Algebra in that first decade, as well as Business Calc and Finite Mathematics.

Did you have a mentor at Villanova University when you began your tenure here?
Fritz Hartmann sat in my class once and gave me some pointers but mostly I was left on my own. I miss Fritz.

What has been your favorite course to teach?
Differential Geometry which I first taught in 1991 and twice since then, with an eye towards the mathematics needed in physics, developing an ambitious online book aimed at motivated undergraduates. This is a fun visualizable area of math which combines multivariable calculus with linear algebra into a powerful tool for analyzing how we understand our world.

How has the typical Villanova student changed over the 40 years?
Every generation laments about changes in students, but the truth is, the world of math education is always changing and technology has had the most impact in what and how we teach most recently, and students who are interested in learning will do so building on the foundations our society has provided them before they arrive in our classrooms.

What has been your best memory?
Not quite a single memory, but the experience of having befriended and later married my wife Ani who was a grad student in chemistry here in the years soon after I arrived. Marrying into an Armenian-Lebanese immigrant family was a bonus.

What advice would you give one of your peers who is just starting as professor at Villanova?
Be flexible with students, we are not rigid drill sergeants. Grading should be secondary to learning, and math should be fun. It is important to encourage students to think for themselves, have an understanding of what they are doing and why and to learn how to organize their thinking using the powerful language of mathematical notation.

As you celebrate 40 years at Villanova, would you like to add anything about the progress of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics?
Somehow as the university has evolved from a teaching university to one with the aspirations of a research university, our large department has retained its friendly community aspects as a welcoming place for both students and new faculty, which makes it a pleasure to work here.

What interests or hobbies do you have that you enjoy when you are not teaching?
We are not one-dimensional, it is important to have other interests in life. I love to do humorous sketching, and I extend my creativity in the kitchen with my cooking partner to write funny little stories about our food experiences, and with all the streaming that we do since the pandemic, share brief little "non-reviews" of those films and series that inspire me. I guess I am an over-sharer, which extends to my progressive political posting on social media that I cannot help from doing as I devour alternative news media daily in a troubling world. And I am a people lover, open to encounters with new people who are receptive to have a positive exchange. Most humans are built to want to interact with others, so whatever serendipity offers, it is worth taking advantage of. Did I forget the fun I have with Maple?