

Too young to drive, but smart enough for college

Fifteen-year-old U of M student shows strong mind, mature faith

By Dave Hrbacek
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Most college students have reached the legal voting age of 18 by the time they first enroll.

One local college senior, however, will pick up his diploma before he is even old enough to drive. Lucas Kramer of St. Patrick in Oak Grove is on track to graduate from the University of Minnesota in December with a degree in computer science. In just a matter of weeks, he will begin his final semester.

He is only 15. At age 11, he set foot on campus and turned more than a few heads when he walked into his physics and chemistry classrooms. In fact, he made the front page of the U's student newspaper, the *Minnesota Daily*, not long after he started in September 2011.

The pre-teen shocked his chemistry professor, Linda Long, who thought his mother, Angela, was the student and that she was bringing Lucas along to class, the *Daily* reported.

Not so. Lucas took his spot in the classroom and proved he belonged that very first week, and has nary a doubter left, thanks to his 3.95 GPA.

A professor in the aerospace engineering department, James Flaten, has gotten to know Lucas over the last three years, starting with a freshman seminar in high-power rocketing in fall 2012, and continuing with work on Flaten's ballooning team over the past three summers.

"This kid is for real," said Flaten, who has been a college professor for 18 years. "In my time at the University of Minnesota, 10 years so far, I have not seen any other students who are as young as him. In fact, not nearly as young as him.

"I appreciate his contributions. I think of him as an idea person. He has an amazing number of ideas. Any time we have a problem, he has more ideas than anybody to solve it."

Actually, Lucas started making believers out of people long before he entered the university. Just ask Bible scholar Jeff Cavins, who had Lucas as a student in one of his Bible studies when the boy was just 7.

"When I was teaching The Great Adventure Bible series at the Church of St. Paul in Ham Lake, one day this mother brought her son in," recalled Cavins, now the director of the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. "She said that he wanted to join in the class and study. I thought that was nice, a young boy who would like to study. I didn't take it particularly seriously because you don't typically get young boys coming to serious Bible studies."

This was a Bible study for adults, and Lucas was the only child present. But, he was no ordinary child.

"I started to realize very quickly that he was special, that he was very engaged and that he was at a level at least where the other adults were, if not a little bit beyond where most of the adults were in their understanding of not only the Bible, but theological concepts and language," Cavins said. "It impressed me."

Lucas kept coming to the studies, and eventually signed up for a class about the psalms. Before the class even started, Lucas approached Cavins and informed him that he had memorized the first 15 psalms.

"He's got a lot of options at this point in his life. He considers priesthood. He considers computers and science and physics. Really, the world is waiting for Lucas, whatever he decides."

Jeff Cavins



Lucas Kramer is one semester away from graduating from the University of Minnesota with a degree in computer science. The 15-year-old from St. Patrick in Oak Grove began taking classes at the university when he was 11. *Dave Hrbacek/The Catholic Spirit*

Cavins didn't believe him. He just said, "That's nice." But, Lucas persisted, and Cavins decided to test him. He picked one of the first 15 psalms and asked Lucas to recite it.

"He rattled it right off," Cavins said. Later, during class, Lucas recited another psalm. Then another. All of the adults in the class became believers in the genius capacity of this young student, Cavins said.

His parents were convinced far earlier.

"By the time he was 2, he was reading," Angela said. "By the time he was 5, he was reading my husband's college books"

Angela's husband, Tim, is an aerospace engineer — in other words, a rocket scientist. He works for an aerospace company that has done projects for NASA.

Apparently, Tim's son has inherited brilliance-plus. "We had him tested when he was younger," Angela said. "He got into the Davidson Institute. It's for kids who test above the 99.9th percentile. They set up mentors. When he was 8, they set him up with a mentor at Augsburg [College] in physics. So, he started sitting in on all these college classes.

"We said, 'Oh my goodness, he's getting [understanding] this stuff. This is crazy.' And, the next class was Physics II, and he was getting it. So, by the time he was 10, the online school said they would pay for him to take Physics III because he had exhausted everything else. So, he did Physics III at age 10 for credit and did great."

He fast-forwarded through high school classes and started college at the U without ever setting foot in a high school building. He kept climbing the intellectual ladder and eventually did some tutoring of adult college students. Currently, he is continuing his summer job working for Flaten on a stratospheric ballooning project.

While it seems like Lucas is on a trajectory to become a brilliant scientist in the field of computer science or engineering, he is pondering the idea of trading that in for a vocation to the priesthood.

He just returned from a priestly discernment trip to

Franciscan University in Steubenville. After getting a master's or doctorate in electrical engineering from the U, he plans to go to Steubenville to get a master's in philosophy, then perhaps go on to the seminary. According to the archdiocesan Office of Vocations, he needs to wait until he's 18.

As brilliant as Lucas is — scoring 34 out of 36 on his ACT test and having an IQ in the brilliant range — it's his faith that might impress those around him even more than his brain.

"He's a very holy kid," Angela said. "He prays every day, does the rosary every day. . . . He has such a love for the faith that since he's been 3, he's listened to an hour of theology before he goes to bed every night."

There are trips to the eucharistic adoration chapel mixed in as well. And, Lucas has engaged in his faith at the U, joining activities at St. Lawrence Catholic Church and Newman Center and regularly attending St. Paul's Outreach events. He does it all because he wants to, he said, not because of parental pressure or anyone else's expectations.

"I've always found it appealing to spend a lot of time in prayer," he said. "Being able to serve others through that is really a neat thing."

A blessing for the family came when the pastor of their previous parish, St. Paul in Ham Lake, Father Jon Vander Ploeg, transferred to St. Lawrence and Newman Center right at the time Lucas began his first day of class. Father Vander Ploeg has gotten to know the family well, and has served both as Angela's spiritual director and Lucas' confessor. He has provided valuable support to Lucas and his family, Angela said.

Of course, the question for someone like Lucas, who has shown such an extraordinary intelligence at such a young age, is: What will he be like once he becomes an adult?

"I would say he has great potential, but I obviously can't guarantee anything specific," Flaten said. "If he continues to grow, then he will become a very exceptional adult."

Said Cavins: "He's got a lot of options at this point in his life. He considers priesthood. He considers computers and science and physics. Really, the world is waiting for Lucas, whatever he decides. I'm convinced that, whatever he decides to do, he's going to rise to the top, and he will incorporate his faith at a high level. He'll be an impressive young man."