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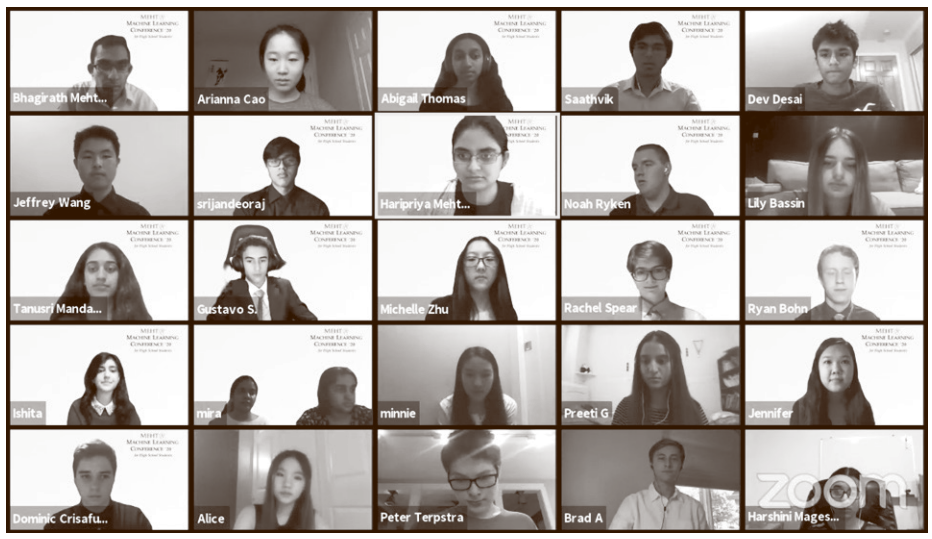

Screen shot of recent virtual learning camp hosted by Haripriya Mehta (second row center). After Maine West, Mehta went on to MIT where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in four years, plus a minor in music.

Always Learning

DP Natives' Thirst For Knowledge Translates Into International Machine Learning Summer Camp

By LAUREN BARRY
Journal & Topics Reporter

When her summer plans were canceled due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Maine West High School alumnus Haripriya Mehta decided she would make the best of the situation.

Along with her brother Bhagirath and her former classmates from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mehta organized a virtual summer camp for Machine Learning that drew 40 participants from both the Northwest suburbs and around the globe. She told the Journal & Topics she was inspired to organize the program after learning that many people she knew would no longer be able to participate in internships or in-person summer camps planned for summer 2020.



During her commencement address in 2016, Haripriya Mehta reminded fellow graduates of the spirit instilled in them by their four years at Maine West.
(Journal file photo)

While similar camps can cost up to $6,000 to attend, this Machine Learning camp cost only $600 per student, according to Maine Township High School Dist. 207.

Though the camp was a success, Mehta said her idea to teach Machine Learning to high school students and college freshmen was first met with skepticism, as the topic requires integration of complex coding and math skills.

According to Stanford University, Machine Learning is a subset of Artificial Intelligence engineering. Mehta described it as using data to train computer models that are then used to make predictions. She used the spam filter included in most email services as an example.

Mehta studied Machine Learning among other topics while at MIT, where she recently graduated after four years with a bachelors degree and masters degree in electrical engineering and computer science as well as a minor in music.

Mehta and her brother taught students more basic coding concepts during the HelloWorld summer bootcamp in 2017 and ran the Maine West 3D Innovations Club in 2016. After these experiences and her time spent teaching other students at MIT, Mehta was confident younger students would be able to grasp Machine Learning concepts.

"I had wanted to teach for a long time," said Mehta, who added that she developed the curriculum for the Machine Learning camp almost overnight.

Students in the camp included three Dist. 207 students, one Glenbrook South High

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Machine Learning Camp

(Continued from page 1B)
School student, one student of Christian Liberty Academy in Arlington Heights and others from Canada, United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, South Korea and more. They participated in four-hour classes through the Zoom application, Monday through Friday, for six weeks beginning June 15.

Instruction covered the use of programming languages such as Python, HTML, CSS and JavaScript along with good coding practices and the ethical implications of Machine Learning. Homework was assigned every day, including calculus problems, linear algebra problems, coding, reading and projects implementing readings concepts from scratch.

Mehta and her brother -- a current Stanford student and fellow Maine West graduate -- were available to students online 24/7 to help with material. They were also joined by MIT graduates Marwa Al Alawi and Andrea Jaba, who served as teaching assistants. Overall, the team put in 550 hours of work over the course of the camp.

"I learned a lot from my students," said Mehta of the camp experience. "It forced me to learn more so I could teach them."

To complete the program, students formed groups and created 11 capstone projects demonstrating different ways Machine Learning could be implemented. Each of the groups created a poster and a paper for their project and presented them during a July 23 YouTube livestream event. Bhagirath served as the host of the event and provided jokes between presentations.

Homework was assigned every day, including calculus problems, linear algebra problems, coding, reading and projects implementing readings concepts from scratch.

Topics included: handwriting analysis, early detection of Alzheimer's disease, COVID-19 Twitter analysis, melanoma classification, chess playing styles, stock price predictions, writing style analysis, music generation, fake news detection, credit card fraud detection and Latin translation.

Of the local participants, Christian Liberty Academy student Ben Kim and Lily Basin of Glenbrook South High School worked on a program that took parts from different songs to create a new song.

Maine East High School student Dev Desai contributed to a project aimed at creating a program that could tell George Washington's handwriting apart from other random handwriting samples. Eventually, the team's code was able to determine Washington's handwriting with 99.7% accuracy, they said.

Maine South High School student Jonathan Spychalski worked on a Machine Learning program that would be able to identify true news articles from fabricated articles based on headlines and a portion of the body copy. Creators of the program said it had a 98% accuracy rate.

Noah Ryken, also a Maine South student, was part of the team that worked on program that would be able to imitate chess styles of individual players. This program required a "discriminator" that would try to guess the moves of a "generator" that in turn would try to trick the discriminator, Ryken explained.

Mehta said she was moved by the possibilities of this program, which could be able to simulate gameplay with a player even after they have passed away.

The Machine Learning camp may have materialized due to disappointments associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but the experience made Mehta realize online delivery worked very well for coding instruction, which she previously did mostly in person.

"Students loved the virtual format," she told the Journal.

Although she is soon expected to begin working at Amazon Audible as a software engineer, Mehta said she plans to offer similar camps in the future through the MehtA+ tutoring organization.

"We definitely want to make this a recurring camp," she said.

More information about the student presentations and other MehtA+ programs is available on the organization website and the student presentations can be viewed here.



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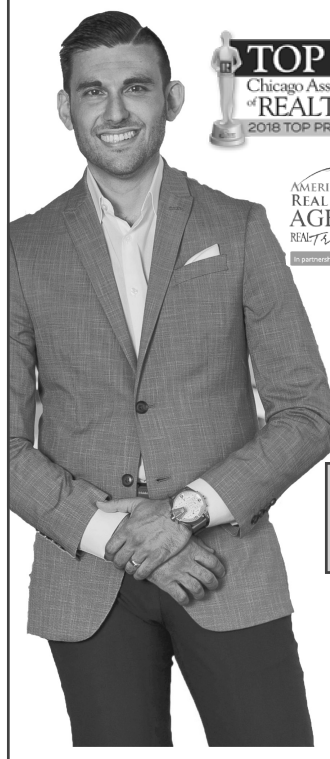

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