

## Crossword celebrity: thirteen letters down

### Calculus teacher has published 104 puzzles for the NYTimes — the 13th most in modern history

By Julie Heng

Peter A. Collins has debuted 489 new words in the crosswording universe.

A notable one? Twerk.

“I don’t know if I should be proud or ashamed of it,” admits Collins, who has taught math at Huron High School since 1981. “That’s the thing about crosswords—you don’t want to use the same old stale words that you see all the time.”

It’s not the first title in Collins’s long list of cruciverbalist accolades.

See, Peter Collins is a bit of a crossword celebrity. At 104 published puzzles and counting, he’s the 13th most prolific modern-day *New York Times* crossword constructor. Online critics rave about his clever themes. At the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in Connecticut, people want to meet him. Just two weeks ago, another constructor arranged to have dinner with him.

“I wanted to get 100 in the *New York Times*, and I made it past that,” Collins says. “Now I don’t really have any numeric goals as far as getting published. I just do it because I enjoy it. It’s a creative release.”

Collins, who played a lot of baseball, basketball, and football growing up, only began seriously doing the daily puzzle in 2005. Then, he decided to try constructing one himself, with graph paper, a dictionary, a pencil and a lot of eraser shavings.

“My wife thought I lost my mind, considering all the hours I put into making the first puzzle,” Collins says.

That first attempt got rejected.

But Will Shortz, *New York Times* crossword editor, noted potential. So from there, Collins purchased a book of Shortz’s favorite puzzles, and was blown away by the ingenuity in the compiled

themes. There were all sorts of explicit and implicit rules in crossword constructing—subtleties most people don't immediately see. The grid usually has 180 degree symmetry, for example, as well as theme symmetry, few black squares and a high word-to-square ratio.

Collins's first crossword was published in USA Today in late 2005, but his first *Times* byline would come as a surprise.

By May 2, 2006, Collins was doing the *Times* crossword every day at lunch with a colleague who has since retired.

"I started doing the puzzle that day," Collins remembers. "It seemed kind of familiar, and I looked up at the name of it, and I was like, holy cow! That's me! That my puzzle!"

After that first *Times* publication, Collins started creating dozens of puzzles. At one point, he had 20 lined up on deck for publication in the *Times*.

His dad would try every single one published.

"He wasn't very pop culturally wise, so if there would be rap artists, or even TV show references, he had a hard time with those, but geography and history he was great at," Collins says. "He was very dutiful."

Collins has learned quite a bit of trivia himself as a constructor in the last 13 years. Many obscure facts comes from Wikipedia tangents, but coming up with new clues mostly involves keeping his eyes and ears open.

"When I hear a new phrase, or a new person who becomes famous, I'll add *Kanye West* or *Chance the Rapper* or something to my word list," Collins says. "It expands your ability to write fresh, clever puzzles."

Now, it takes Collins about six hours total to construct a crossword, usually not all in one shot. He works on one or two a month. Even though Collins has whittled the crossword-constructing process down, coming up with any good theme still takes time and a stroke of luck. The ideas emerge while he's walking, riding his bike, or laying in bed at night.

Just take a look at his portfolio (conveniently compiled at [xwordinfo.com](http://xwordinfo.com) for anyone curious). Hours of care are taken to assemble miniature houses, fish, and DNA strands of letters, to hide Beatles members, date movies, and Hemingway references in a simple boxed grid.

Take “New World Order,” which hides the anagrammed word “world” within phrases like “swordlily,” “blowdryers,” and “fieldwork.”

See it?

“He loves showing off his themes,” says Bianca, Collins’s daughter and student at Eastern Michigan University. “He doesn’t want to give away too much, but you can tell he’s excited.”

Most people are interested when they learn of Collins’s ability, too. Even if they don’t solve crosswords themselves, they know of an aunt, grandfather or cousin who does. Above all, they don’t expect a calculus teacher to be so proficient in wordplay.

“I don’t know!” Collins says, laughing. “I just really like words, and what they mean, and how they can be used differently, and how they can interact and interlock in a puzzle. Something about that I just find appealing!”