



Santiago Perez (left) and Dr. Sass (right), physics teacher, examine a mini robot, which they programmed last year.

Island Trees Student Aces MIT's Summer Academic Boot Camp

By Dr. Andrew R. Sass

When Santiago Perez, then a junior at Island Trees High School, got home from school one day this past April, he found his acceptance letter to MIT's rigorous 6-week summer program introducing select students to science and engineering.

MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) is arguably the premier high tech college in the world and the target school for some of the best and brightest students produced by high schools in the U.S. and abroad. The MITES summer program is the Cadillac of a half-dozen summer programs around the country designed to familiarize students with careers in physical and life sciences. All expenses of the program are paid by the Institute. Admission to the program is extremely selective; this past year 60 students from a field of about 1,000 were chosen following a lengthy evaluation process.

Santiago's acceptance letter promised a summer filled with a minimum of 12 hours a day of classes and homework, with this workload on weekends as well as weekdays for six weeks. The letter pointedly said "...If you are not willing... please do not accept this offer."

Santiago who is a well-rounded student at Island Trees with interests in science, robotics, language, art, and music, not only accepted the challenge but embraced it; he ignored the physics 1 and physics 2 class and instead applied for and gaining entry to the program's fabled physics 3 course, the most advanced and impossibly difficult of the program. He also gained entry to the higher-level calculus

2 instead of settling for calculus 1. In addition he took viral biology, digital design, and humanities 3.

His competition in these courses consisted of many students who had taken corresponding AP courses in their junior year. Santiago had not yet taken these courses since Island Trees offers them as senior electives.

Santiago had a lot of ground to make up and only six weeks to do it. While most of his classmates spent their summers relaxing, Santiago spent it in classrooms, laboratories, and in his dorm room studying till 2 or 3 a.m. and sometimes even later. Work stretched to 20 hours a day.

Santiago vividly recalls being given an assignment at 1 a.m. to write an essay about a late-night movie, which had just ended. Since the essay was due that day, the only solution was to work all night. He spent another sleepless night preparing his digital design project presentation to an MIT faculty audience. The finale to the frenzy of activity was the preparation for the Physics 3 final. He and fellow students moved sleeping bags into the lobby of an MIT research building and studied together.

Santiago explored the limits of his capabilities by going beyond them at the toughest academic boot camp of them all and in the process learned more about himself than he ever could have imagined.

Santiago registered the second highest final grade in physics 3, the highest grade in viral biology, well above average in calculus 2 and a first place award in digital design for a video game application program he created for iPhones.