



Karisa Solt and her mother, Colleen, at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, site of NJIT's January 2004 graduation ceremony

KARISA SOLT:

NJIT'S YOUNGEST GRADUATE

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KARISA SOLT LEARNED TO READ WHEN SHE WAS 4. A year later, she amazed her parents by reading a children's dictionary — cover to cover. When she was 12, she read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. At 14, she took a physics course at NJIT and, later the same year, took the SATs — “just for fun.” She scored 1450.

At 15, Karisa was admitted, on full scholarship, to NJIT's Albert Dorman Honors College, where she majored in biomedical engineering. At 18, she finished her class work and became the youngest student ever to graduate from NJIT. Karisa is sad about leaving NJIT, but excited about her next step: medical school at Johns Hopkins University. What's most impressive, she did all this having never gone to grammar or high school.

How did she get so smart so young?

“I was home schooled,” Karisa says. “That was the best thing to ever happen to me.”

Karisa moved to Newark at age 3 with her parents, who work as “church planters,” starting new church-

es around the country. The Solts lived in a Victorian house near the Evangelical Free Church of Newark, which her father founded. Her parents preferred not to enroll her in public school, and private schools proved prohibitively expensive. So her mother, Colleen, decided to teach Karisa at home.

It was the perfect way for Karisa to learn. Colleen scheduled school from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., after which Karisa was free to pursue other interests: soccer, the saxophone, the clarinet. Colleen and Karisa would repair to the Newark Public Library replete with empty crates; they'd leave with the crates brimming with books — 40 or 50 at a time. Oftentimes Karisa would read, blissfully, for eight hours a day.

Colleen was a progressive yet rigorous teacher. She had read that music stimulates the imagination. She thus allowed Karisa to listen to classical music while she learned. She also discerned that Karisa liked to hold things while she learned. So Colleen allowed her daughter to knead play dough during

class time, something a formal school might not have permitted. Karisa was free to do her homework anytime during the day. But if her homework wasn't completed before bedtime, on the following day Colleen would give her twice the work.

Colleen also joined a home-schooling association, through which Karisa got to perform music and play sports with some 300 children. Karisa never felt isolated or socially deprived. She also had four younger brothers — Dan, Tim, and twins Josh and Caleb — to play with. All of them were also home schooled until four years ago.

Colleen, who did not attend college, hewed to demanding curriculums for science and math. But overall, she made learning fun. Her mother had Karisa write reports when she was very young. “But I wrote about things I loved,” Karisa recalls, “like scuba diving in Mexico.”

“Teaching Karisa at home was a joy,” her mother says. “She had an insatiable desire to learn. All I had to do was put the material in front of her.”

Karisa's father, Marc, a minister with a doctorate in divinity studies, disagrees with Colleen's humble assessment. Karisa's passion for learning, Marc says, was nurtured by Colleen. “My wife was the most energetic and creative teacher a child could ever have. I just remember the two of them having so much fun while they learned. Colleen made learning fun.”

Faith and religion were inextricably linked with Karisa's intellectual development. The family recently moved to Pennsylvania, where Marc founded the Evangelical Free Church of Allentown. Marc, who grew up a Christian missionary in Mexico, is as proud of Karisa's religious devotion as he is of her intellect. Karisa runs the church's youth ministry, Marc notes, and is taking Bible studies at a Biblical university. When Karisa finishes medical school, he adds, she wants to work as a medical missionary, helping poor people who lack medical care.

“We're just very proud of her,” says Marc. “In our eyes, God has given her a special gift.”

When Karisa was 14, though, home schooling reached its limits, and it was time to move on. Karisa wanted to take physics, and for that she needed a physics lab. She approached NJIT, which, despite her tender years, let her take physics. A year later, Karisa, who loved the school, enrolled as a full-time student.

Karisa, then 15, was nervous about fitting in with older classmates. But that apprehension soon faded when she saw the students “were normal people, just like me.” Bright and gregarious, Karisa quickly made friends at NJIT. She lived at home her first two years. For her final two years, her parents agreed to let her live in a campus dorm while they moved to Pennsylvania to establish the church in Allentown.

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Karisa excelled as a fullback on the NJIT women's soccer team and, along with a load of rigorous classes, belonged to a long list of clubs. She got straight As, except for one B+. A professor marked her down a grade for missing three classes to take a family trip to Mexico. Nonetheless, she graduated in January, as class valedictorian, with a near perfect cumulative average of 3.996.

Karisa made a lasting impression on her professors, including Bill Hunter, professor and chair of the biomedical engineering department. “I didn't know she was as young as she is until the middle of the semester,” Hunter said. “She looks older and she's one of the brightest students I've ever had. She is in an intellectual league of her own.” Hunter, who formerly taught at Johns Hopkins, was so taken by Karisa's brilliance that he wrote a letter of recommendation for her to the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. A few months later, Karisa was accepted. It's on to a new chapter in her life.

At Hopkins, she will pursue both a medical degree and a PhD in biomedical engineering. She hopes, when she finishes med school, to do biomedical research at a university hospital while also seeing patients. And, as her father noted, she will take time every year when she's a doctor to minister medically to the poor.

“It's my dream life,” says Karisa, “combining my faith with biomedical research and medical training. And it's what God wants me to do.” ■