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# DISNEY'S MAGIC

## IT'S BACK!

Corporate profits are surging as Chairman Michael Eisner launches new theme parks and broadens the company's role in movies and television

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## A DIFFERENT KIND OF COMPUTER WHIZ KID

Jonathan Rotenberg built his users' group into a powerhouse

**T**rade show promoter Gerry Mildren hadn't met Jonathan Rotenberg in 1978, when he called to ask Rotenberg's help in organizing a major computer show. He knew only that Rotenberg, president of the fledgling Boston Computer Society, was difficult to reach at the Commonwealth School, a Boston prep school. "I always assumed he was a teacher in his late 20s," Mildren recalls. It wasn't until Mildren invited the computer whiz for a drink after work that the truth came out: Rotenberg couldn't accept the invitation. He was 15.

It would be just another cute story, except for one thing: The BCS has become what Mark P. Overington, a marketing manager at Lotus Development Corp., calls "probably the most influential users' group in the country" for testing the public acceptance of new personal computers and software. Such ground-breaking products as Apple Computer Inc.'s Macintosh computer and Commodore International Ltd.'s Amiga made their public debuts at BCS meetings. And Rotenberg, always eager

to score a coup, has lately been negotiating with International Business Machines Corp. to host the first public viewing of its new personal computer later this spring.

It all started in 1977 when Rotenberg tried to buy a personal computer for his school and discovered that computer stores didn't provide much information on how to choose or use the machines. Soon after, Rotenberg co-founded the BCS with an adult, Richard Gardner. Rotenberg became president the same year after Gardner left Boston for an Austrian commune. Now 23, he concedes that he might have been young for the job. "I still had braces, and my voice hadn't changed," he says.

**ELIGIBLE BACHELOR.** But he proved he was qualified. Outside of school hours, Rotenberg worked tirelessly to promote the society's goal of demystifying computers for thousands of potential buyers. As a result, the BCS celebrated its 10th anniversary on Feb. 25 as the largest group of computer enthusiasts in the U.S., with 23,000 members each paying \$35 a year in dues.

From a split-level, 10-room office that used to be a bar in Boston's financial district, the BCS's full-time staff of nine publishes newsletters and a monthly magazine called *Computer Update*. It also organizes hundreds of discussion groups on computer issues and products, from data bases to software programs for dentists. And it invites computer makers to come demonstrate their latest wares to BCS's audience, which includes not only hobbyists but also many top corporate computer buyers. Favorable word of mouth can lead to big sales.

As the BCS's reputation has bloomed, Rotenberg has blossomed into an industry superstar, jetting around the country to attend conferences and commanding consulting fees of up to \$3,000 a day. With that earning power he says he makes more than \$50,000 a year. Even so, he still lives in a modest, two-bedroom apartment in Boston's Back Bay. Rotenberg holds down both his expenses and those of the BCS by being a notorious cheapskate, often inviting company CEOs to lavish dinners and then sticking them with the bill. "Jonathan loves to go first class but never pays for it," says software developer Daniel S. Bricklin, a BCS member. Recently, a local magazine

granted the gangly jogging enthusiast the ultimate Boston accolade: He was anointed one of the city's 10 most eligible bachelors.

Despite his celebrity, Rotenberg hasn't lost his boy-next-door modesty and candor. That's helped him enlist thousands of volunteers and solicit dozens of free computers and a vast library of software programs from manufacturers eager to expose their products to BCS members, who often stop in to use them. Stewart Alsop II, publisher of *PC Letter*, a personal-computer newsletter, recalls being interviewed by a reporter whose editors had instructed him to balance a gushy profile of Rotenberg with some critical comments. After three weeks of digging, Alsop says, "the reporter told me he couldn't find anything bad to say because most people like Jonathan."

**ANOTHER WOODSTOCK.** Life for Rotenberg wasn't always so fat. In the early years of the society, he had to drag his parents into delivering BCS brochures to computer stores. And computer companies didn't exactly jump through hoops to accommodate the BCS. "When we first started out, a few computer stores sent their salesmen around to show us new stuff," Rotenberg recalls. That situation changed as BCS membership soared and Rotenberg began sponsoring meetings that attracted crowds of as many as 3,000. "Now companies send their presidents," he says. Among them: former Apple Chairman Steven P. Jobs and Tandy Corp. Chairman John V. Roach.

Showcasing a new product at the BCS is no guarantee of success, though. In 1983, Coleco Industries Inc.'s lavishly promoted Adam home computer failed to impress a BCS audience and subsequently bombed in the marketplace. Even a BCS rave does not necessarily make a product a hit. Back in the late 1970s, Rotenberg and his cohorts were big on Commodore's Pet home computer, but it failed to attract many U.S. buyers, though it was popular overseas.

With the BCS thriving, Rotenberg is broadening his membership outside New England. He already has signed up 5,000 members in other states. He is also forging alliances with groups of computer enthusiasts in Europe to build an international network of computer societies. Closer to home, he's organizing what he calls a Woodstock of personal computing, a 10-year retrospective festival that would assemble every computing luminary in the world under one Boston roof later this year. Aside from that, "I don't have any big future plans," says the Brown University graduate. "I'll just see how things work out."

*By Alex Beam in Boston*



ROTENBERG WITH A STATUE OF FORMER BOSTON MAYOR JAMES M. CURLEY