

## The Latest Whiz Kid Of Computers Runs On a Novel Program

\* \* \*

### Jonathan Rotenberg, 19, Skips Role of a 'Techie' to Excel At Organizing Aid to Users

By WILLIAM M. BULKELEY

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BOSTON—At age 15 he organized a personal-computer show that drew 48 exhibitors and 1,000 visitors. At 18 he was putting on dinners for high industry executives. Now that he is 19, he is getting up to \$1,500 a day as a consultant.

Jonathan Rotenberg, only a college junior, is the president of the Boston Computer Society, a 4,300-member group he helped found seven years ago. He publishes a slick bimonthly magazine called *Computer Update*, with a circulation of about 10,000. When Digital Equipment Corp. brought out its new personal computer, it sent a helicopter to bring him to see it.

"He's a high-tech impressario," says H.E. James Finke, former president of Commodore International Ltd. Mr. Rotenberg, adds Benjamin Rosen, a venture capitalist and newsletter publisher, "has inherited the title of most precocious computer entrepreneur."

Despite his age, Mr. Rotenberg (pronounced with a long "O") is already a prominent figure in the world of personal computers. That world is a kind of subculture, an engrossing pursuit whose earnest devotees discuss disk drives the way another generation's hot-rodders talked of carburetors. Many followers feel a pioneering romance about the field, flocking to computer shows, often with wads of \$100 bills, to see the latest software and to meet the industry's pathfinders. Mr. Rotenberg knows what makes these people tick.

#### Another Side

But precocity isn't unusual in the personal-computer field. It has grown so fast—reaching \$2 billion in sales in 1981 and likely to almost double this year—that many middle-age business executives have been taken by surprise. What makes Mr. Rotenberg stand out is a different talent.

"This industry has a number of teen-age programming wizards," observes Mitchell Kapur, the 31-year-old president of Lotus Development Corp. "Like musical genius, you expect that. But Jonathan has great management and verbal skills."

In three-piece suits and neatly cropped hair, the tall young man moves easily

among the business's top people, putting on seminars, organizing shows and lining up speakers. Says Allen Sneider, who is a computer-society director and a partner in the accounting firm of Laventhol & Horwath, "It's as if you had a high-powered executive disguised as a college student."

Mr. Rotenberg bristles at the notion that he might be a one-dimensional computer jock. "The stereotype of computer groups is hippies with plastic pocket liners talking in computer jargon," he says. He resisted becoming one of these "techie," as he calls them. "I had the notion the micro-computer could spread out and be useful. I always saw it as a consumer technology."

So, while developing the Boston Computer Society and its magazine, he learned about writing, graphic design, printing, accounting, advertising and contracts, building on an instinct for publicity and a knack for persuading others to work hard in pursuit of his ideas. Among those projects: a continuing struggle against computer jargon.

The personal-computer field isn't old, and Mr. Rotenberg has grown up with it. At 13, he assembled an Altair computer for the private school he attended in Boston. Shortly afterward, he formed the Boston Computer Society with a local radio announcer. A few months later, the announcer shaved his head and left to join a religious commune.

"I was 13," Mr. Rotenberg recalls. "I had braces. My voice was changing. I called myself 'meeting coordinator' because I didn't think I could be president."

Just as personal computers weren't always taken seriously by established computer companies, Mr. Rotenberg sometimes has run into skepticism resulting from his youth. To appear more professional, he used to practice his telephone voice and add secretary's initials at the bottom of his letters.

His father, Michael, a real-estate developer, remembers getting calls asking that Jonathan's secretary call back about appointments. "I wanted to maintain his credibility," the senior Mr. Rotenberg says. He once told an executive that Jonathan "was away on the Cape"—neglecting to add that he was there for summer camp.

In 1978, Gerald Mildren, the president of a trade-show promoter called Northeast Expositions Inc., began asking Mr. Rotenberg for advice about putting on computer shows for the public. Mr. Mildren, who now pays Mr. Rotenberg as a consultant, says that after they had talked on the phone many times,



"One night I said, 'Let's go out for a drink.' He said, 'I can't.' I said, 'Why not?' he said, 'I'm 15.'"

Mr. Rotenberg came up with the novel idea of a show solely for software and accessories for Apple computers, a show he dubbed "Applefest." Mr. Rotenberg ran the first one in Boston two years ago and drew 10,000 people, despite holding it on a broiling weekend in a facility without convenient parking. Northeast Expositions produced Applefest this year and drew 23,000.

Mr. Mildren, 39, is among the admirers of his youthful colleague. "My ambition is to be just like Jonathan when I grow up," he says. "That guy has the ability to be president if he wants to."

#### Job Offer

But for Mr. Rotenberg, the high point of Applefest was the chance to meet Steven Jobs, at 27 a near-legendary figure in the world of personal computers. Mr. Jobs, who co-founded Apple after dropping out of college and selling his Volkswagen to buy computer parts, was impressed himself. He flew Mr. Rotenberg to California and urged him to quit college and come to work for the company.

"I thought about it for about five minutes," Mr. Rotenberg says. But "I like college, and it's not as if the opportunities will go away; they get better."

For now, at least, his interest in promoting computers doesn't have much to do with making money. Although the computer society he heads has a few paid staffers, he doesn't draw a salary. The group has been so much a part of his life that to take money from it "would be like robbing myself."

He isn't hesitant about asking others to help the society. At one dinner for industry leaders this year, Mr. Rotenberg stood up and asked for donations. He has obtained numerous free computers for the group's store-front center and done even better at getting top executives to speak at meetings. One last fall drew high officials of Apple, Commodore, Tandy, Atari, Sinclair and even usually secretive IBM. Directors of the Boston Computer Society include Mr. Kapur of Lotus and Daniel Bricklin, author of the VisiCalc business program.

A main purpose of the society is to help users, and it serves as an umbrella for groups of owners of particular computer brands who gather to discuss problems and new products. Mr. Rotenberg now is working to make the organization national. One of its directors, Tracy Licklider, believes that "his real dreams are international."

#### No Computer Courses

As for the society's magazine, Mr. Rotenberg started it as a newsletter and for years published it from his bedroom in his parents' Beacon Hill townhouse. His father spent Saturday afternoons distributing it to local computer stores. Mr. Rotenberg has turned much of the magazine work over to

the right I said, 'Let's go out for a drink...'



about the last... these top people... he has no intention...

others, but still sells its ads, writes a column and contributes to a roundup of industry news.

Mr. Rotenberg has managed to keep all this going despite his college schedule. At Brown University in Providence (where he has an A-minus average), he takes all his classes in the morning, puts in a four-hour day on the phone and returns to Boston twice a week. "I don't have a full college teen-age life," he concedes.

For relaxation, he plays computer games. He currently is trying to design a video game in which a player wins by "building something rather than destroying it." But his college major is economics, and, in fact, he is taking no courses at all in computers. "It would seem like a cop-out," he says. "I'm coming to college to broaden my horizons."

There already have been a number of job offers, in several fields besides computers. When he graduates, the list of offers will grow. Mr. Kapor of Lotus Development predicts he will spurn them all to start a company of his own, or perhaps to "invent a new industry."

Mr. Rotenberg isn't saying. For the time being, he quips, "I just hope I don't have a mid-life crisis before I graduate from college."

the fact that... the fact that... the fact that...

I thought about it for about five minutes... the Rotenberg says, "I like the idea, and I'll see if I can find the opportunity with you to do it."

the fact that... the fact that... the fact that... the fact that...

A main purpose of the society is to help... and it serves as an umbrella for...

the Computer Council... as for the society's magazine, Mr. Rotenberg...

On a Novel Program... The Computer Run... Advertisement for a computer-related program.

By... of... Advertisement text.

... Advertisement text.

... Advertisement text.

... Advertisement text.

... Advertisement text.

... Advertisement text.