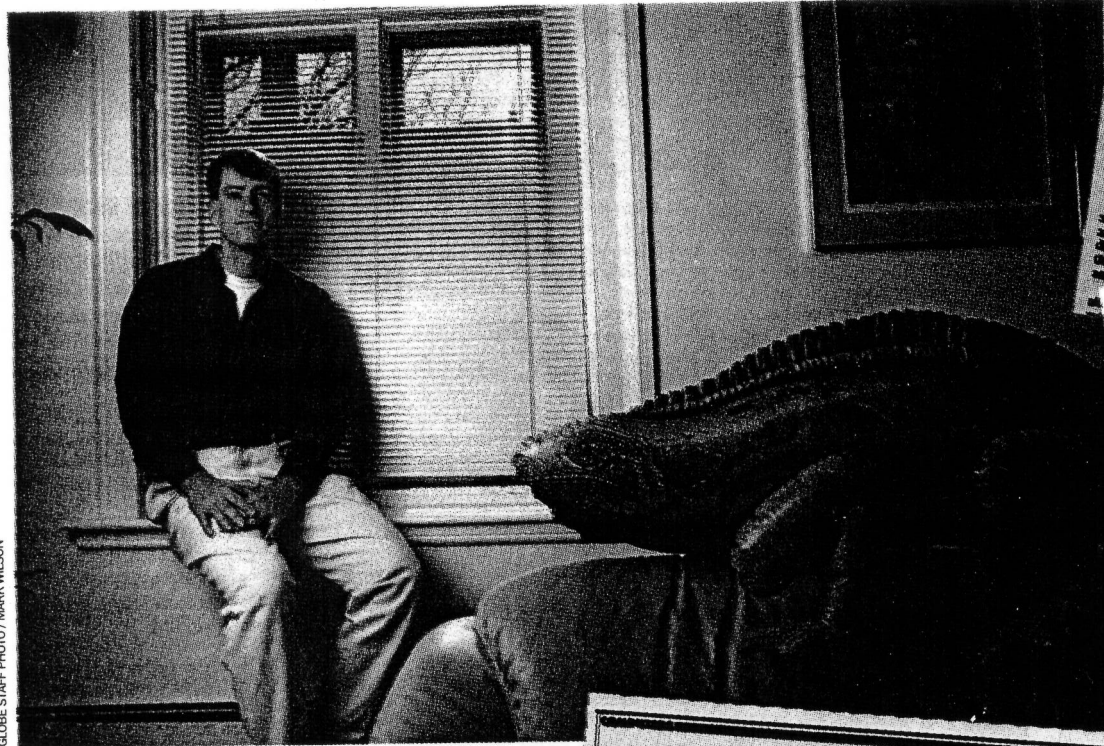
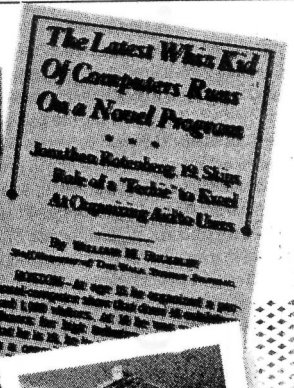


Living Arts

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON



Rotenberg at home today with his plastic iguana, left; as whiz kid, above.

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF JONATHAN ROTENBERG

How a teen's private turmoil led him to found the nation's premier computer society

A DIFFERENT KIND OF COMPUTER WHIZ KID

Jonathan Rotenberg built his users' group into a powerhouse

Their show promoter Gerry Miller 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...

to secure a copy, has lately been negotiating with International Business Machines Corp. to lead the first public viewing of its new personal computer later this spring. It all started in 1977...

granted the group's growing confidence: the ultimate Boston accolade. He was appointed one of the city's 10 most eligible bachelors.

Despite his celebrity, Rotenberg hasn't lost his big-mustache combed-back and coiled. That's helped him enlist thousands of volunteers and solicit donations of free computers and a vast library of software programs from manufacturers eager to expose their products to Rotenberg, who often stays in the one place...

By Nathan Cobb
GLOBE STAFF

As a teen-ager sporting braces and faking secretary's initials at the bottom of his correspondence, he invented and ran out of his Beacon Hill bedroom what was to become the largest and most influential organization of computer users in the world.

Apple Computer founder Steven Jobs thought enough of the kid and his Boston Computer Society not only to give him a solid gold pen but also to whisk him to California to listen to a recruitment pitch. (The kid turned it down.) Such was the kid's fame — and his nose for publicity — that he made the likes of People magazine, CBS News and the front page of The Wall Street Journal before being handed his college diploma.

Now a tall and lanky 31-year-old man-

agement consultant, Jonathan Rotenberg has watched with the rest of us as the personal computer — during the late 1970s a product for kit-builders, hobbyists and hackers — has evolved into a household appliance found in roughly a third of US homes. Meanwhile, the 24,000-member BCS, which had a \$120 annual budget when he founded it in 1977, today requires \$1.2 million per year to function. But Rotenberg himself has also changed significantly, coming to understand what was never revealed in those news accounts of the 13-year-old wunderkind with the thick glasses whose little computer club grew into a giant: that personal angst played a major role in the almost obsessive passion he brought to creating and running the outfit that made him famous.

In 1991, a year after leaving the BCS and in the midst of earning a degree from the Harvard Business School, he began the painful and liberating process of telling his

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How a teen's turmoil led to nation's premier computer society

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family and friends that he is gay. (True to his instinct for publicity, he informed the rest of the world via a Fortune magazine cover story about gays in corporate America.) Although he wasn't sure of his sexual identity as a teen-ager, he now says this uncertainty only deepened the private unhappiness that caused him to create a public life.

"If I'd been straight, I wonder if I'd ever have formed the Boston Computer Society," he declares today, sitting in the sun-sprayed living room of his spotless duplex condominium in Back Bay. "I would have had a much more normal life. And I wouldn't have had the need to escape."

No whiz kid

After all, Rotenberg was never really a hard-core propellerhead, never really the classic whiz kid that he was often perceived to be. (He's still miffed that Apple president John Scully, in a handwritten inscription on a copy of Scully's autobiography, referred to him as "the ultimate enthusiast.") He didn't actually own a computer until his parents gave him one for high school graduation, three years after he started the BCS. True, he was interested in cutting through the technobabble of the digital subculture and in making computers more accessible to just plain folks, but people who knew him at the time suggest that he could have as effectively and passionately built an organization for confused users of, say, back-yard gas grills.

"I've always viewed him as more of a businessman than a techie," says Mary McCann, who in 1981 became the first full-time BCS employee. "Computers happened to be the hot subject at the time and he latched onto it. If something else had been hot, he would have latched onto that. He simply has an exquisite sense of management."

Yet away from the BCS, Rotenberg says, he was a discontented and confused teen-ager. He was shy and unsure of himself. He had few close friends. School was difficult and demanding. "Being a teen-ager in high school, what's life supposed to be about?" he asks today, then provides his own answer: "Coming of age, dating, having carefree times, exploration, that sort of thing. In all of those areas, I was unhappy. At school there were the nerds, the supercools and the beatniks. I'd been plugged into the nerds, but I didn't feel I belonged there. And I was nowhere near cool. Nothing was fun or enjoyable. In 11th grade I'd lie in bed at night, feeling that the walls were closing in on me."

But as a highly regarded executive, the toast of the local digital universe, he could sidestep the thorny issues of teendom. "It was an incredible way to skip growing up and become an adult," he says. "I could change costumes and become this 'computer expert.' I felt so different from my peers but so competent and effective in the computer world. So I stayed with adults. The BCS was my way of not being a teen-ager and all the implications of that, including the growing awareness of my sexual-

ity." While his parents knew that the younger of their two sons was socially uncomfortable, they didn't know he was leading a kind of double life.

or lonely, because he just seemed to be so involved in things," recalls his father, Michael, a real estate management executive. "We didn't see that his immersion [in the BCS] was the result of something else. We thought, 'Well, he's just filling his time,' and we were pleased by that. But clearly something was driving him, and we didn't realize until later what part of that might have been."

Myth vs. reality

As a teen-ager decked out in his adult "costume" — invariably a three-piece suit — Rotenberg indeed seemed to be riding high. He had co-founded the BCS with a local disc jockey (who subsequently disappeared from town) in part because he couldn't locate much information on an Altair microcomputer kit. He was soldering together the unit for Back Bay's rigorous Commonwealth School, where he was a high school freshman and where the early BCS gatherings were held. Only two other people showed up for the first meeting, conducted in the library, although that and subsequent events have become mythology in local computer circles:

How, for example, Digital Equipment Corp. helicoptered Rotenberg to Marlborough in 1981 to show him its new personal computer. How, three years later, Apple unveiled its Macintosh computer on the East Coast at a trio of theatrically produced BCS meetings. Or how Rotenberg threw lavish dinners for the likes of Jobs and Microsoft Corp. founder William Gates and somehow always got them to foot the bills.

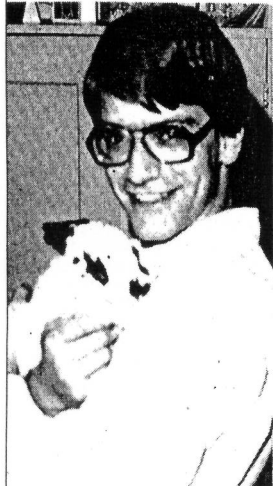
As more and more personal computers were sold and more and more people joined the BCS to learn how to run them, Rotenberg became a kind of cult figure. Raised on the fashionable south side of Beacon Hill, where his neighbors knew him as the kid who played with his pet rabbit on the front stoop, he'd been a reserved child who occasionally metamorphosed into Hinduni, a magician who played birthday parties for \$10 per performance. Before long he was pulling down \$3,000 a day as a consultant to National Computer Shows (NCS), a local outfit that set up consumer and trade shows based on those Rotenberg had been staging for the BCS. "That's where this condominium came from," Rotenberg says today, a thin smile spreading across his narrow face. Chirps former NCS president Gerald Milden, who has retired to homes in Florida and on Cape Cod: "Jonathan Rotenberg made me a multimillionaire."

To BCS insiders such as Allen Sneider, Rotenberg was bright, articulate, charismatic, even messianic. Sneider, who served as the group's treasurer for several years, refers to him as "the spiritual leader who had the vision, the ambition and the story to tell. He had his disciples and he spread the word. He could just inspire others. I was a senior partner in a national accounting and consulting firm, and I was perfectly happy to set up chairs for him for a meeting."

Personal struggle

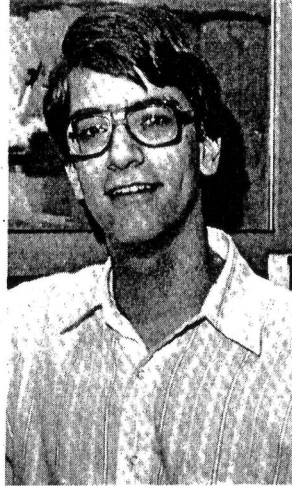
But away from the BCS, unknown to family and friends, Rotenberg himself was waging his personal struggle. Underlying his teen-age anxieties was the burning issue of

Jonathan Rotenberg



"The lamb and the lion may lay down together, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

- Woody Allen



Rotenberg's 1980 high school yearbook page: "I was nowhere near cool."

his sexuality. "I realized that I wasn't feeling what I was supposed to feel - crushes on women - and I began to feel there was something wrong with me. So sexuality was an issue, but it was submerged. I couldn't deal with it directly. I'd think about it, get upset and put it out of my mind."

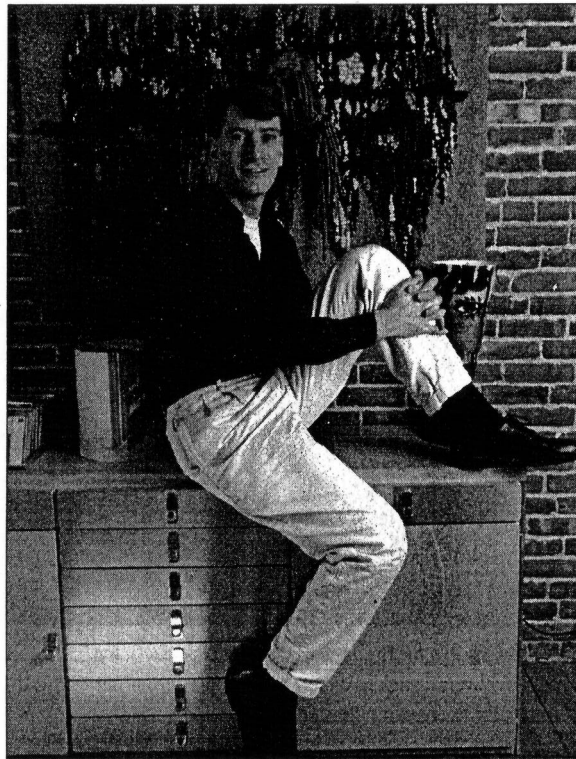
Rotenberg eventually attended Brown University, majoring in economics while running the BCS by phone - and via Bonanza bus lines, which ferried him to the organization's Government Center offices on weekends. And then, five years ago, having concluded that "I could run the BCS for the rest of my life or I could do multiple things," he walked away from his \$70,000 post. His departure rocked the group, leaving it bereft of his vision and the kind of dogged perfectionism that demanded all incoming telephone calls be answered by the third ring.

"It was devastating," says Pam Bybell, who is the third chief executive the organization has tried since Rotenberg departed. "Jonathan had done everything. All the homework. All the background work. We didn't have leadership at any level of the organization."

Coming out

But if the BCS has since struggled to recapture its earlier spark - its membership peaked at 31,000 about a year before its founder left - so has Rotenberg had to grapple with facing life after the BCS. On one hand, he has clearly been successful: a degree from the Harvard Business School as well as a post at Monitor Company, a prestigious Cambridge-based management consulting firm. On the other hand, he says he was initially terrified by the notion of leaving his cocoon. "It had been my whole life, my whole identity. I really didn't have much of a life outside of it. I had no idea what I was going to do. It was a very tough time."

There was that other problem, of course. "Many of the issues I'd put off were related to being gay," Rotenberg recalls. "In high school I'd sometimes ask myself, 'I wonder if I'm gay?' But I decided not to think



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

"The BCS was my way of not being a teen-ager," says Rotenberg.

about it because it seemed to be the worst thing I could imagine. I didn't have problems with other people being gay, but it just seemed opposed to everything I believed in. I thought I'd find the right woman and my life's purpose would be met."

Having given up his all-encompassing role at the BCS, Rotenberg was forced to confront his uncertainty head-on. Gay? Straight? Somewhere in between? He eventually found his way to the small Harvard Business School Gay & Lesbian Student Association, became more comfortable with what he calls the gay "scene" and came to his conclusion. A year later he helped set up an audiotext hotline at the school on which telephone callers could listen to about 150 questions and answers about sexual orientation as well as

gay and lesbian life. For his efforts he was presented with a memento at his 1992 graduation ceremony. "This is the first time the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' have ever appeared on a Shreve Crump & Low Revere Bowl," he muses.

His parents learn

"To say we were surprised would be an understatement," Karen Rotenberg says of learning that her son is gay. "Ultimately my husband and I have to say that we're both happy because it became clear that he was a happier person now that his family and friends knew," adds Karen Rotenberg, owner of Alianza Contemporary Crafts on Boston's Newbury Street. "I was distressed, however, that I didn't know of this before and

couldn't have helped him earlier on. But you can only deal with the present."

Today, Rotenberg - whose job it is to help multinational companies become more competitive - routinely puts in a 65-hour work week. He walks 70 minutes back and forth to his office each day, waking at 5 a.m. and beginning an 80-minute workout an hour later. A trim, 6-foot-2, 185-pound sailor and hiker, he gets around town in a seven-year-old Honda Prelude.

"I feel my life is now very integrated," he says. "Back then [as a teen-ager], I felt like it was very disjointed. I was living this life of different people, people who were separate. I was this competent business person, and outside of that I was this miserable high school person. I was two separate people. Now I feel like one person."

These days Rotenberg talks of taking a leave of absence from Monitor to do something in the area of gay rights, in educating people about homosexuality and homophobia. Not surprisingly, he initially considered forming an organization, though one modeled after the American Association of Retired Persons rather than the BCS. More recently, he considered writing a book on how employees can make their bosses more hospitable to gays and lesbians. Both plans were scrapped, the first as unworkable and the second as unmarketable. Now he's not sure what he'll do if he indeed takes a leave. "He likes having a regular stream of accomplishments," says a friend, David Dechman. "If he doesn't, he gets antsy."

Avoiding the Internet

This much is certain: He no longer maintains a connection to the BCS, although he was given a lifetime membership when he left. He believes that the group's initial role - making computers accessible to the masses - has been swept aside by the waterfall of books, magazines and technical support services that has washed over the industry. The BCS must now find a new purpose, he says, something it is still struggling to do.

When Jonathan Rotenberg was a 13-year-old high school freshman with thick glasses and braces, personal computers were so new that nobody had a handle on in what manner people would eventually use them. "We would sit around speculating about what computers would be used for in the future," he says of those early BCS meetings, which were no larger than kaffeeklatsches. "The two most prevalent theories were that they would control your lawn sprinklers and keep your recipe files."

Nowadays his own computer uses are no less sublimely practical: word processing, personal finance, spreadsheets, e-mail. He doesn't own a CD-ROM drive, and he is no Internet surfer. "It has no value for me," Rotenberg says of the Internet, the vast collection of computer networks that often seems as much buzzword as reality. "My view has always been to be a critical consumer of technology, not to own something just for the sake of having the latest gizmo."

"Besides," says the man who was once at the very center of the emerging personal computer culture, "the Internet seems like such a black hole."