

MINDSET

Rainman goes to RockWiz

By Fran Molloy



Born blind and diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome as a child, Mark Boerebach dreams of becoming a rock star in a detailed imaginary world that he has constructed, called Earth Two.

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Mark Boerebach runs an online radio station, develops coverart for 80's compilation CDs and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Australian rock charts of the 1980s.

Mark is articulate and obviously intelligent; he's competent in web development, has good computer skills and has also completed five TAFE courses for high-demand skills such as graphic design, web design and

prepress publishing.

And yet, since leaving school twenty years ago, the 37-year old has been unable to land full-time paid work. Born blind and diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome as a child, Mark has endured bullying and long-term unemployment during his lifelong struggle with dual disability.

Before he started school, he had gone through six operations to partially restore his sight and while doctors focused on helping him overcome his visual disability, he struggled to cope with the sensory overload and other early problems associated with Asperger's Syndrome, which is a developmental disorder on the autistic spectrum.

Characteristics of Asperger's often include an exceptionally good memory, a very literal communication style, difficulty in understanding non-verbal cues, narrow special interests which can become obsessive and strong adherence to routines and order.

Most people with Asperger's don't experience the learning difficulty and language delay typical of autism – in fact, many are highly intelligent - but they usually have difficulty with social skills and communication.



The youngest of four brothers, Mark was painfully shy and awkward as a child and has struggled to fit in socially for most of his life. And since childhood, each night in his dreams he has visited a detailed imaginary world called Earth Two where anything is possible.

On Earth Two, Mark has been a rock star, an astronaut, a political leader. On Earth Two, he has a wife and a rich and successful life.

But here in the real world, Mark is unemployed and lives alone. Bullied daily at school, he remembers many incidents where groups of boys would physically attack him in the playground, while teachers stood by.

"The teachers basically thought I needed to learn to fend for myself if I was going to make it in the real world," he says. "It just would not happen nowadays; schools don't let that go on any more."



In the first job Mark held after leaving school, with a government agency, the bullying continued. "I was physically assaulted, yeah," he says.

For several years, Mark tried to find sympathetic employment but struggled to fit in – and by the mid- 1990s, unsurprisingly, he had a nervous breakdown. While I spoke to Mark about these dark times, I was surprised at his lack of bitterness, his compassion and his positive approach.

He spoke of sensory overload and says that 'positive' sensory overload, through the feel of a particular type of plastic, gave him a way of coping with the stresses he experienced in daily life.

Despite his positive approach and constant struggle to find work, his journey has been a difficult one. But things are looking up for Mark.

A chance encounter with film producer Amy Scully last year has led Mark to move closer toward his dream of working in the recording industry, to appear on television in a display of his extraordinary music industry knowledge – and to realise that life on Earth One, the real world, may be even more fulfilling than his imaginary dream world.

A series of coincidences brought Mark into a music industry class taught by filmmaker Russell Kilbey, who is also a well-known musician, sound engineer and composer.

Astounded by Mark's knowledge of Australian music of the 1980s, Russell encouraged him to enter the music trivia show RockWiz, which screens on SBS TV. Russell and his wife Amy Scully have filmed the journey of this courageous disabled man towards a different type of rockstar-dom.

Called Rainman Goes to RockWiz, the documentary about Mark's journey to Melbourne's Espy Hotel to appear on the music trivia show RockWiz screened on SBS on Oct 22 2008 at 8pm, with the episode of RockWiz featuring Mark screening in the same week Oct 25 at 9 20pm