

About New York

Smart Kid on the Block

By JOHN CORRY



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Eric Lander at his home in the Flatlands area of Brooklyn

Eric Lander, who may be the smartest kid in town, was talking about Arthur, his brother. "Arthur does most of the cooking, and he gets very creative," Eric was saying. "Last night, mother and I were sitting here with a chicken cutlet, and we decided to wait to see what Arthur would do with it. Well, he made a chicken cutlet omelet, with herbs and spices. He's an amazing kid, really."

Last week, Eric, who is 17 years old, won a \$10,000 scholarship in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search. Before that, he was second in a national mathematics competition, and here and there he has won French contests. He is tall and slender, he is raising a mustache, and with Arthur, who is 15, he cares for a Venus fly trap. Its name is Modo.

Eric Lander won the \$10,000 scholarship with a paper on quasi-perfect numbers. He says they probably don't exist, and that conjecturing about them is the kind of thing that only a number theorist would enjoy. A horseplayer would say it was 6, 2 and even Eric was right.

"I did well in elementary school, but nothing special," Eric said. He was at his home in Flatlands in Brooklyn, sitting in the kitchen, where Arthur had transmogrified the chicken cutlet the night before.

"Then in junior high school I ran into a very nice math teacher," Eric said. "He helped me a lot. Of course, there were trials and tribulations along the way. In junior high school, a lot of kids didn't accept you if you were interested in learning."

Eric waved his hands, smiled, and dismissed the wounds of adolescence.

"At Stuyvesant High School, where I am now," he said, "I think we have the finest math team in the city. We creamed the competition, routed the city. I want to restore to Brooklyn the title of math capital of the world."

On the wall behind him, there was a sign. "Bless This Mess," it said. Eric also plays the clarinet, builds things around the house, corresponds with other mathematicians, read science fiction, discusses constitutional law, and is fascinated by the number 17.

"Now, if you have a 17-

hole bagel, and you want to make it into a map showing 17 countries, with each country colored differently, and you don't want any two countries that touch to be colored the same, do you know the minimum number of colors you need?" he asked.

"Seventeen," he answered himself.

"Bagels remind me," he said, "when I was in Washington for the Westinghouse finals, we met these three girls—from Ohio, California and Alabama—who had never had bagels and lox. We found a place that sold them, and took the girls there.

"It was \$4, exorbitant, but we thought we were right in spreading culture. We thought it was only right that we take them out."

He italicized the word "right." He enjoyed the memory hugely.

Eric's father died a few years ago. His mother, Mrs. Rhoda G. Lander, teaches social studies at Abraham Lincoln High School, and Arthur, his brother, is a student at John Dewey High School.

"He's an amazing kid, really," Eric said again, speaking of Arthur. "He's much better at languages than I am. He's written three plays and he's only 15. Arthur learns by himself, you know. He took three years of German on his own, and four years of Spanish."

Eric got Arthur's bar mitzvah picture. He said that besides being so smart, Arthur was a nice kid, too.

"I think that Arthur goes to John Dewey because at other schools he was known only as Eric's younger brother. Now he's making a name for himself, on his own. Isn't that great?"

Eric smiled, looked proud, and picked up a basketball. Then he went outside, and began shooting baskets at the hoop he had nailed up in front of his house.

"Hi, Eric, what's up?" an elderly neighbor said.

"Oh, not much. I won a Westinghouse scholarship, a competition in Washington," Eric said.

"Oh?" the neighbor said.

"\$10,000 prize," Eric said.

"Yeah, good luck," the neighbor said.

Eric looked modest, and said something else about Arthur.