

## INTERCAMP

# Silencing the mental noise

BY TYLER MORENCY

FEATURES EDITOR How a schizophrenic copes with his condition and participates in society

Austin Marden has three university degrees. He described himself as an overachiever. He leads a different life now.

"Basically I lost 50 IQ points in the space of one hour," he says. He's busy sorting papers on the other end of the phone. The Super Bowl is on in the background. Occasionally, there are long gaps between complete sentences. "I knew in 1992 when I was hospitalized that many things would be closed to me," he says. "That's okay. People have different cycles in their lives." While walking the block from his basement suite to the hospital, he'd get lost. Only a few years earlier, Marden remembers nearly falling to his death in a crevasse while searching for meteorites in Antarctica.

Marden, along with several international researchers traveled to a remote region of Antarctica as the first Canadian geologist to go on a meteorological expedition. The experience left a severe psychological mark on Marden. "I was nearly killed several times," he says. There's a long pause, the televised Super Bowl crowd cheers on his end. "I got sick with Post-Secondary Stress disorder but finished my second degree, my third degree."

Now he makes a modest living by writing articles and doing advocacy work while receiving Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH). Schizophrenia ran in Marden's family. He remembers feeling isolated as a child. While similar feeling about one's childhood aren't uncommon, Marden is quick to point out the distinction. "Everybody has problems, but there's a difference between having

problems and being psychotic," he says. He describes his symptoms as paranoia and delusional thinking. "I tend to be very cautious and afraid

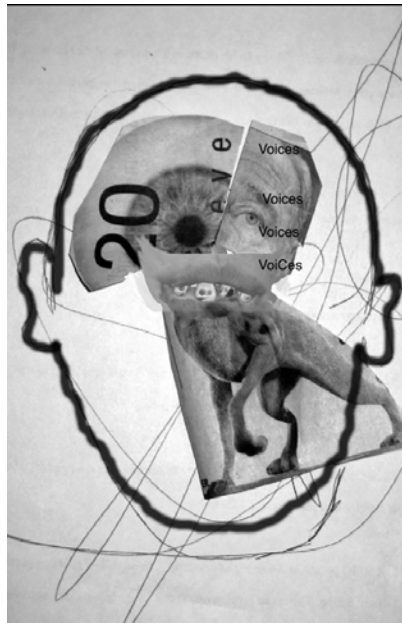


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER MORENCY

of social situations. I see visions and stuff. I see things that aren't there," he says.

"I've got the cognitive problems, the paranoia, the psychosis, but I have a lot of confidence," he says. "People who get sick at the age of 18 and don't have the experience don't have that." He says taking medication consistently has made his life manageable. He says he leads a calm, relaxed existence. For him, taking a job could lead to another nervous breakdown.

David Watson, a MacEwan psychology teacher says that schizophrenics often find themselves on the margins of society. "They easily get overwhelmed with life," Watson says.

"Interpersonal relationships can be a big problem. It can be tough to be odd." Watson says dealing with side effects of medication can be a tremendous issue for a schizophrenic. "A lot of anti-psychotic meds are major tranquilizers and they really slow you down," he says. "It can be tricky to find a drug that works for them," he says.

Watson routinely has speakers from the Schizophrenic Society of Alberta lecture in his class.

"Sometimes the scenario is if someone who is doing really well in life—getting top marks, doing all kinds of things—starts suddenly to deteriorate and seem not like themselves anymore." He mentions textbook examples—delusions of conspiracies, of being controlled by outside forces or of reference. "Sort of like 'the TV is talking to me, only me,'" he says. "Having an elaborate sort of delusional system is typical of paranoid schizophrenia," he says. "(The delusions) may on the surface seem logical but are really based on a foundation made of sand. There's no real basis to it all."

Watson says the symptoms are wholly convincing for a person suffering from them. "It's frightening because they believe it... No one understands them." The symptoms vary from person to person. Many suffer from delusions of "thought-broadcasting," which the person believes their inner-monologue is transmitted and observed by other individuals. Conversely, others may believe their thoughts aren't their own, but planted in their minds by a shadowy organization. "One of the speakers said he used to see giant green bats flying down Jasper Avenue," he says.

"It didn't bother him because he knew it wasn't real. What really bothered him was the floor-not knowing whether the floor and walls were solid or not."

Watson said basic sensory perceptions that all people depend on and take for granted are subverted for a schizophrenic.

For Austin Marden he says he continues to cope with the challenges of schizophrenia. A Super Bowl ad continues from the TV. He stresses the importance of maintaining a medication schedule. "If you go in to see a doctor and he wants you to take medication, it's probably a good idea to take that seriously," he says. "They're not just giving it to you for their own enjoyment. If I wasn't compliant, where would I be..." he pauses. His wife answers from somewhere in the room, "I'd lock you up so fast." "She'd lock me up so fast," he echoes. "I'd either be dead or outside eating garbage." Early treatment of mental illness is important. Book an appointment with your family doctor if you think something is wrong.