

A Prodigy Grows Up

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It is well known that 1969 was the year of the Mets' baseball miracle, but few people know that it was also the year of the miracle of George Barany. Barany, now an assistant professor of chemistry at the University of Minnesota, was 14 and living in New York City in 1969, the year he fulfilled a rash deal with his mother. He agreed to win the citywide math competition for his age group and the citywide tennis tournament, and to learn to do 10 chin-ups. Kate Barany's part of the bargain was to get her son World Series tickets *if* the Mets won the National League pennant. George did, the Mets did, and Mrs. Barany did.

"The hardest part of all was doing the 10 chin-ups," says Barany, now 30, who has been setting and achieving difficult goals for himself since he was a youngster. Although he had only audited courses at Columbia and New York universities, he was accepted as a graduate student at the prestigious Rockefeller University when he was 16 years old. He was awarded his Ph.D. at age 22.

"There was nothing really obviously special about my background until junior high school," Barany recalls. "The first focus for me that I might have some special gifts was when I was in seventh grade and made it to the math team. At the end of the year we were given a math test that eleventh-graders took to determine math proficiency. I was only a seventh-grader so I had to petition to take it. I got 100 percent, and from that point on I really enjoyed math and found I could read math books the way other people read novels. I didn't have to do any of the exercises, but understood the material right off. I just thought it was something fun to do." He picked up a calculus textbook one summer vacation and taught himself calculus in three weeks.

Barany began taking college courses at age 14 while still a high-school junior. He applied to Rockefeller University when he graduated. Because of his youth, the school was reluctant to accept him. The administration foresaw problems for him, some of which came true. The main concern was his maturity and social readiness. Rockefeller is strictly a graduate institution, and Barany would find himself among students twice his age.

"At Rockefeller I found myself under enormous pressure," he says. "I worked very hard and felt I had to prove I belonged. There were people there who were jealous of me, who couldn't deal with the fact that a 16-year-old was in the same lab as them — they who had studied in the finest schools not just in the country but the world. So they were not very forgiving when I did the usual stupid things any inexperienced person would do."

Barany was born in Hungary of Jewish parents who twice had to escape tyranny in Europe. His parents were put in concentration camps during World War II, and, having survived, fled Hungary after the Hungarian revolution. They both are research scientists in Chicago, and Barany credits much of his success to their guidance.

"My mother is a very, very intelligent person," he says, "and she was extraordinarily well organized. So she had time to come home after her work and spend time with her children. [Brother Francis is a research chemist in New York.] Just about every day I knew there would be an hour I could spend with my mother that was my time. We'd usually go for walks, and I could talk about anything, not just schoolwork. My mother set up a general environment where learning was fun. Science was fun, math

was fun. She would make games and puzzles out of math problems.” His father, meanwhile, was working hard to support his family.

Growing up a prodigy had a great impact on Barany’s life, and he has given the phenomenon of very bright children a lot of thought.

“I would tell these children to relax and just try to enjoy what they are doing. Don’t be compelled to be somebody they are not. Realize that you can be very talented in one area and just normal in others. One can get very enamored of the whole trip of being a prodigy. Also, you have to be disciplined, force yourself to be disciplined. It’s easy to become lazy if everything comes easy to you. But if kids do not have the motivation in themselves, I don’t think someone else should force it on them.

“One more thing about this whole concept of being a prodigy. Its not where you start but where you level off that counts. I’ve gotten places faster than others, but the important thing, I think, is where I’m going to finally end up, and ultimately what my life’s accomplishment is going to be. Many prodigies have gone on to lead very useful but certainly not spectacular lives. No one should be considered a failure if they were a prodigy when they were young and turn out to be good, solid, competent persons.”

Barany, who is single, now spends his days teaching, doing chemical research and pursuing his interests, which include opera, spectator sports and, occasionally, movies. His average work week runs 80 hours, spread over six and a half days and at least four nights. Recently he isolated the active ingredient of garlic, which is being tested for its cancer-inhibiting properties.

“I don’t know if it’s within me to do, but I read biographies of people who, by their individual contributions, changed the lives of everybody — like Newton, Einstein, Edison,” Barany says. “I think that you’re on earth, maybe, to do something, and when you’re gone, something you’ve done has an impact.”