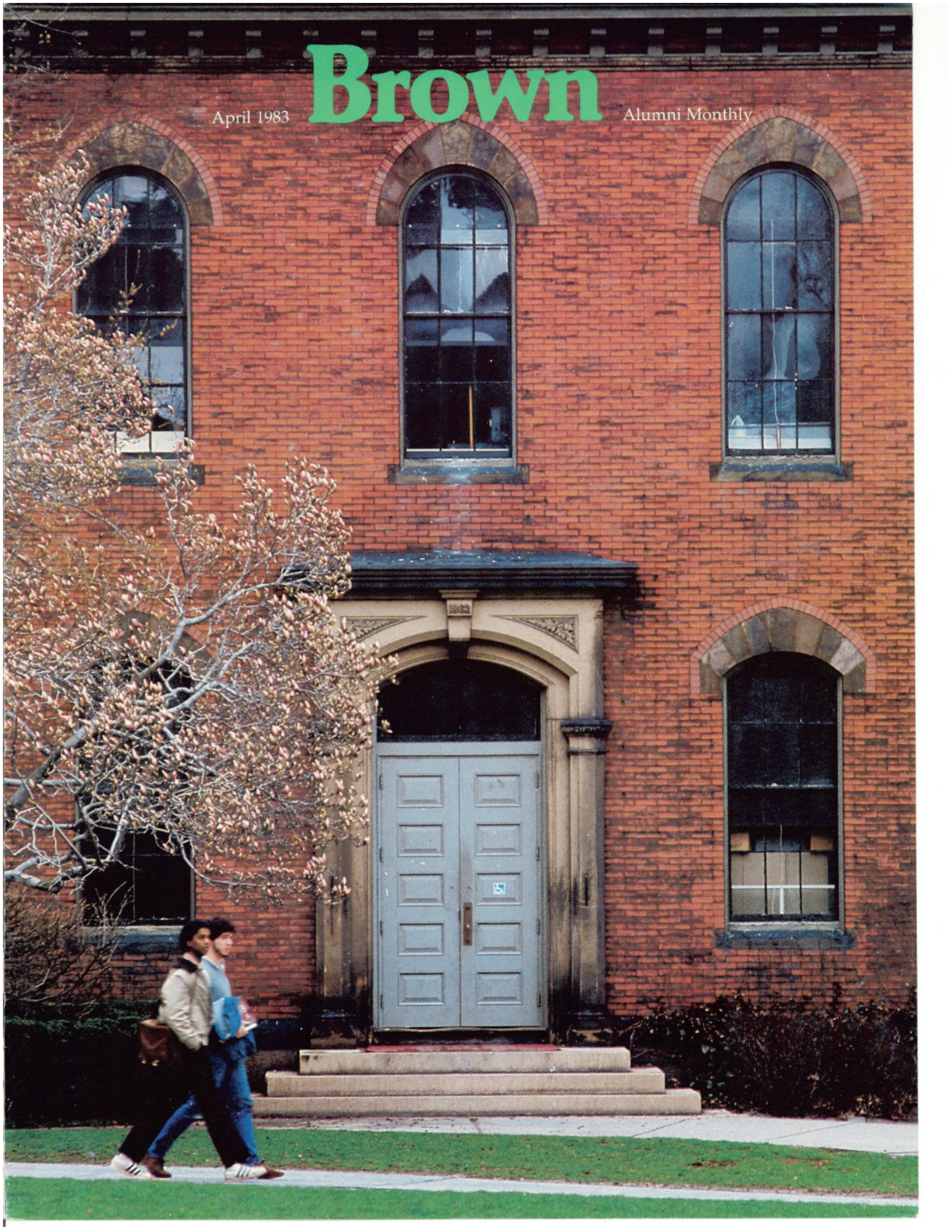# Brown
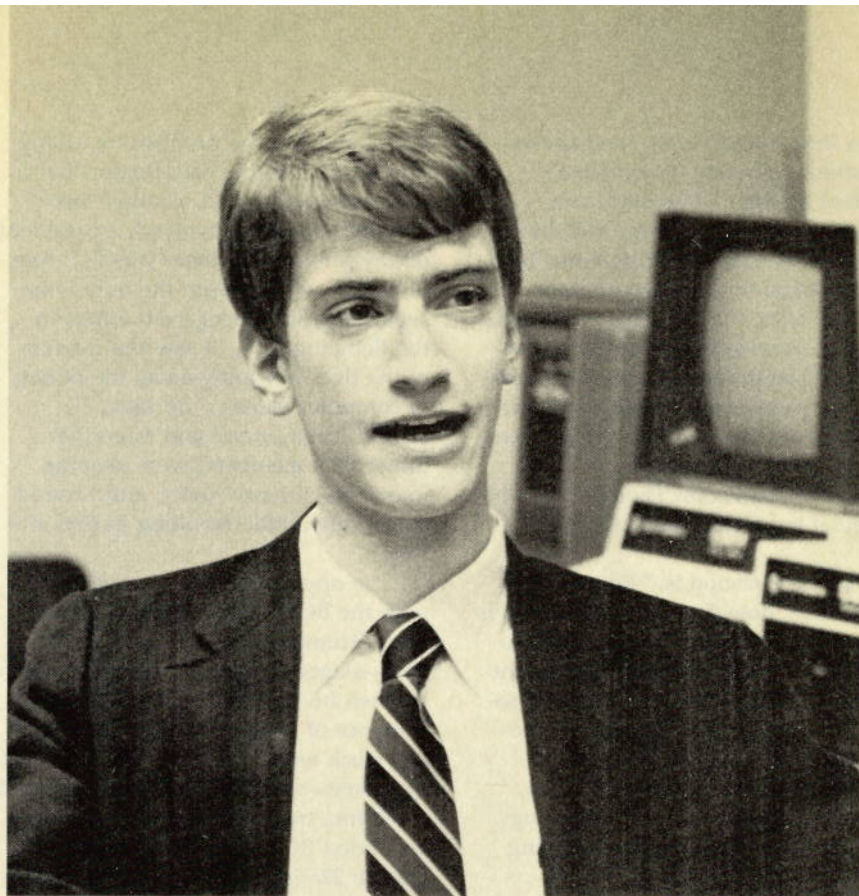
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By Wendy Quiñones

JONATHAN ROTENBERG '84:

(Computer) Power to the People!

Jonathan Rotenberg '84 started out small. The first meeting of his little computer club attracted a grand total of four people, including himself and his co-organizer. The first computer show he organized was a one-day affair a year later that drew 1,000 people to a university function room costing $700 for the day.

But then, Jonathan Rotenberg also started out young. At the time of that first Boston Computer Society meeting, he was all of thirteen and a high school freshman. By February 1984, when he and another co-organizer will be footing the bills for a national trade show in the New Orleans Superdome (with daily costs on the order of $30,000), his little club should have more than 12,000 members, and Rotenberg—BCS founder, president, publisher of its magazine, and independent consultant—will have attained the ripe old age of twenty.

Rotenberg is a prodigy even by the standards of the computer industry, many of whose leading lights are under thirty. The club he started in 1977, when personal computers were barely

a gleam in the industry's eye, has become the largest organization in the United States devoted exclusively to personal computers—which in turn have become the hottest items on the computer industry's shelves. Rotenberg has literally grown up along with the personal computer, and, as it has prospered, so has he. As recently as eight years ago there *were* no personal computers; this year one company alone (Apple Computer, Inc.), out of dozens of manufacturers, is producing them at the rate of a million units a year. BCS, which operated for several years out of Rotenberg's Boston bedroom, now boasts sleek headquarters in downtown Boston with a budget of $25,000 a month and two full-time staff members. It is growing at the rate of 500 new members a month—and that's not even considering Rotenberg's plan to make the society national, or his ambitious million-dollar fund-raising efforts for a Computer Discovery Center. Companies the likes of Apple, which may be said to have opened the personal computer door, have been catapulted from garage shops to For-

tune 500 status in record time; Rotenberg, who may be said to have originated the notion that personal computers should be easy, accessible, and fun for non-technical people, estimates that he will earn about half-a-million dollars this year—"and probably a lot more next year."

But Rotenberg is no computer groupie in the mold of those he describes as "the hippies with the plastic pocket liners." Indeed, he confounds the stereotype in every respect. A tall, slim young man who recently replaced heavy glasses with contact lenses, Rotenberg habitually sports a businessman's wardrobe, a serious air, and a calm self-assurance that have set him apart from his peers in high school and college as much as his age has set him apart from his business associates. Unlike the technical people who started the industry—electronics whizzes who loved squinting down soldering irons and who imagined their products would create an instant race of programming geniuses—Rotenberg's interests are less in computers them-

selves than in their uses—and abuses—in a society growing ever more dependent on them. "Personal computers are a new medium, and they pose new dangers; their potential for good is equal to their potential for bad," he says. "With large computers, the issue is invasion of privacy; with personal computers, it's people becoming overly dependent—personal computers becoming so efficient that there will be no need for people to talk to each other any more. There is a terrible potential to produce antisocial behavior.

"So the question is," Rotenberg continues, "how do you say that this is a good thing—giving people a tool to make them more efficient? What right have we to make major changes in society?. . .[My] goal is to educate people, because the most fundamental problem is that people won't know how to deal with the new technology. Education is a weapon against being afraid."

Much of the personal computer industry has lately begun to share some of Rotenberg's ideas, particularly that of the necessity for making personal computers easy to use—bringing them down to the level of the novice user rather than expecting the reverse. But Rotenberg himself has been far ahead of the rest; for him, the idea arose full-blown almost simultaneously with his discovery of the machines themselves. In 1976, as a thirteen-year-old freshman at a Boston private school with an interest in programming, he was looking at microcomputers—another name for personal computers—to replace the teletype-computer hookup the school was about to eliminate. In nine months of research, he found few satisfactory sources of information about the new machines; existing magazines and stores simply couldn't answer his questions. Amazed also at the lack of a computer club in Boston, he wrote to the host of a radio computer show. Together they founded BCS; a few months later the host decided communes were more to his taste than computers and suddenly departed, leaving the whole show to Rotenberg.

"You have to picture this," he recalls with a smile. "I was thirteen years old, I had braces on my teeth, and my voice was changing. I didn't look or feel like the president of an organization. I avoided the problem by calling myself the meeting coordinator, but if somebody had asked whether there was anybody else involved, a president or anything—well, there wasn't." Age, however, was far from the only issue separating Rotenberg from others in the fledgling BCS. "I saw the mission of the BCS as wiping away the notion of computer elitism," he says. "I started feeling more and more that [other BCS members] were keeping micros in an ivory tower, and I found something a little revolting in that attitude."

The opportunity for change came with the BCS's first computer exposition, "Home/Business Computers '78"—staged, of course, by Rotenberg. By then he had learned about the importance of promotion—a lesson that has stuck with him in spades—and did his homework well. The show attracted exhibitors from all over the region and expanded BCS membership from seventy to 225 in a single day. The controversy over opening the membership was moot; Rotenberg's vision of a broader audience had proven itself. The show had its frustrations, of course: "People stopped me during the show," Rotenberg recalls, "and said, 'Hey, kid, do you know where the show director is?'"

Those were, after all, still the days when he faked secretary's initials on the bottom of his correspondence, refused to smile in face-to-face meetings so his braces wouldn't show, and practiced lowering his voice over the telephone. The rest of the family, accustomed already to years of giving aid and comfort to its youngest member's always ambitious projects, participated in the deception. His father, Michael, a real estate developer, remembers taking telephone messages and explaining that Jonathan was away on the Cape—and thoughtfully omitting the additional information that he was on the Cape at summer camp.

Over the telephone, those little deceptions were remarkably successful. "I talked to him on the phone for six to nine months, and I was treating him like a peer, like a grown-up. It was a shock to discover he was only seventeen," recalls Benjamin Rosen, president of Rosen Research, Inc., in New York and one of the industry's leading analysts. Gerald Milden, president of Northeast Expositions, Inc., a Boston-area trade show promoter, remembers calling Rotenberg a number of times for advice about putting on public computer shows. One night he invited Rotenberg out for a drink; the invitation elicited the reluctant admission that he was only fifteen.

But that didn't dampen Milden's admiration for Rotenberg, for whom he enthusiastically harbors presidential aspirations and whom he pays handsomely as a consultant for such projects as SoftCon, next year's New Orleans extravaganza for the computer software industry. The two have also joined forces on Applefest, the now-annual show devoted exclusively to Apple computers and products for them, initiated by Rotenberg in 1981 as the first-ever single-brand computer show; CP/M, a show early this year devoted to business uses for microcomputers; and another planned for the IBM Personal Computer. "Knowing Jonathan is no different from having another thirty-nine-year-old friend or business associate," says Milden, thirty-nine himself. "He is a consultant who advises me on computer shows—not that he couldn't do [other types of shows] as well, but that's all I can fit in between his final exams."

The contrast between Rotenberg's age and his achievements has certainly heightened interest in him; a thirty-nine-year-old with his accomplishments might not have rated a front-page profile in the *Wall Street Journal*, a two-day feature on "CBS News," a picture spread in *People* magazine, and prominent mention in both the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* and *Boston Magazine*, along with unwanted attention from the *National Enquirer*, which a threatened lawsuit has evidently discouraged. Although for a time he was rather resentful, feeling that people paid more attention to his age than to what he was doing, he usually jokes about it—declaring, for example, that he hopes to stave off his mid-life crisis at least until he graduates from college. On occasion his age has caused him real annoyance; while attending his own CP/M show, for instance, he discovered to his outrage that he was too young to rent a car. "There I was—every car company in San Francisco was just about sold out because of *my* show," he was still fuming a month later, "and they wouldn't

rent me a car!"

And on occasion his age has even caused a mild misunderstanding. Because of it, Stewart Alsop II's first impression of him was that Rotenberg was "an obnoxious jerk. It was the opening of the Computer City store in Cambridge and there were about 100 people there, including the governor," recalls Alsop. "Jonathan was sitting in the back leaning up against the wall like he was royalty receiving—and he was just this pimply-faced little kid! My first impression was not good—but it was inaccurate," Alsop concedes. "He was probably just nervous." Since then Alsop, thirty-one, has taken on increasing roles in BCS; he is now chairman of the board and editor of its magazine. He serves in those capacities without pay, like all BCS workers (except two paid office staff members), and has become a staunch Rotenberg admirer. "It's fascinating to me to get to know somebody like Jonathan, because at nineteen all I did was party and try to avoid schoolwork," he says. "Jonathan is incredibly perceptive about people, and I've learned a lot from him about how to judge people, how to motivate people. And that carries over to my paid professional side. It's been a very valuable experience."

The fact that his elders often feel they have something to learn from him perhaps accounts for one of Rotenberg's most outstanding abilities—that of convincing people they have something to gain by doing a great deal of work for nothing. Alsop, now editor of *ISOWorld,* a computer trade weekly, estimates that while he was managing editor (as opposed to simply editor) of *BCS Computer Update,* he spent fully 50 percent of his time in that unpaid job. It is interesting to note that the magazine's writers are also unpaid—"That way people write for us because they want to," Alsop explains—and that Alsop is now hunting for a publisher who will undertake (according to an *Update* ad) "publication marketing, advertising sales, long-range planning, newsstand distribution"—also without compensation.

Allen Sneider, a partner in the national accounting and management consulting firm of Laventhol and Horwath, estimates that he spends some forty to fifty hours a month on BCS as director, treasurer, founder of three of its most popular user groups, and sub-

leader of two others. For him, it's a matter of sharing Rotenberg's goals. "It's a good feeling to contribute to something I feel is worthwhile and that provides the public with a valuable service," he says.

Ironically, the one place Rotenberg's influence has been felt the least is where one might expect the reverse: the Brown campus. From the beginning, according to his academic advisor, Associate Professor of Linguistics and Associate Dean of the College Naomi Baron, Rotenberg perceived college as a place to broaden his knowledge rather than limit and intensify it. Baron says he came to Brown asking the questions, "What should I learn about? What is it that, if I don't learn about now, I'll miss?" It is a source of pride to Rotenberg that he has taken courses in fourteen departments.

That does not, however, include the computer science department, which he has steadfastly avoided and of which he is in fact critical. His early overtures were rebuffed, he recalls, out of what was at the time the common attitude among large-computer advocates that personal computers were little more than toys. Later experiences with the University's highly-rated computer facilities did nothing to soften the conflict between the two views. "The computer facilities they have are incredibly difficult to use," Rotenberg says. "They're not doing things like guides for non-science students.

"I think that at a university computers should be available in exactly the same way that libraries are. But they're into a different approach," he continues. "People say to me, 'Aren't you taking any computer courses?' They don't realize that computer scientists are my archenemies, because they started the whole mystique I've set out to get rid of."

Professor Baron sees herself as an example of the exciting developments that might have occurred at Brown had Rotenberg's reception been different. About a month after their first meeting, she recalls, "Jonathan brought in a new hand-held computer, showed me how it worked, and connected it to the phone [and to one of the videotext services]. I saw things I had never learned in eleven years on the Brown faculty, and that I would probably have never learned in another eleven." Her own

interest in computers was piqued to the point where she has bought an Apple IIe, joined BCS, is taking night computer courses in Boston, and plans to buy a kit to build her own computer robot. But with its emphasis on large mainframe computers and complex programming languages, Baron says, the Brown computer sequence requires at least five courses "before a student can get to the point of doing anything fun, like graphics."

Brown is hardly unique in this, she continues. "Most universities are the same. Until now, universities have had total control over what languages are learned and who becomes a programmer. But micros are going to make a form of self-teaching available that hasn't been seen before."

Should this occur at Brown and elsewhere, Rotenberg will undoubtedly be one of the most delighted onlookers. But onlooker he will be, just as, ironically, he has been of much of the craze to actually use personal computers. Although college papers and other writing projects make him now a frequent user of both his own computer and those that manufacturers have donated to BCS, his original plans after founding the society did not include computer ownership. "I had decided that I would never have a personal computer because people would think I was biased," he recalls. But alas—youth cannot always enforce its decisions on its elders. "When I graduated from high school," he shrugs, "well, it was the natural graduation gift."

But the gift did not lead to addiction to the machine itself, as it has in so many other cases. I know this because Rotenberg lent me his Apple for a story I was working on and in a full month never once called to complain or ask me to hurry. And so I thought I knew the answer when I asked him later whether he, the computer whiz kid extraordinaire, actually used his computer very much.

He was utterly—and uncharacteristically—nonplussed by the question. He laughed, actually blushed, and slid his eyes uneasily around the room before he answered. "No," he confessed, "I don't really have the time."

As the BAM *went to press, Brown unveiled a proposed $50-million computing experiment that would include installation of 10,000 workstations on campus by 1989. Details in the May issue.*

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