

# SUNDAY LUNCH WITH . . . A HUMAN CALCULATOR

## 'I began to be able to predict what people were going to do'

DEBRA PICKETT



e-mail:  
dpickett@  
suntimes.com

I did not, of course, have to repeat my cell phone number to Mike Byster. The first time I said it out loud, he'd instantly memorized it, using a complicated mnemonic that adds together the first four digits and then compares that number to the last three digits.

"That's just the first thing that came into my mind," he says genially, as if most anyone would have done the same thing eventually.

Byster, 46, is a retired Merc trader reputed to have the world's fastest math mind. He does not think in the same way that the rest of us do.

To test this for my own amusement, I sat down across from him at Lulu's in Evanston and whipped out my calculator.

He could add numbers faster than I could punch them in. And multiply them. And divide them.

Then he asked me for my driver's license number and quickly figured out my birthday and on what day of the week I was born.

It was cool but also a little freaky. I mean, I didn't know there was a pattern to the way driver's license numbers are assigned, but even if I did, and even if I had an enormous amount of free time, I don't think I would have ever sat down to try to figure out how it worked.

Byster, though, sees the world as a series of patterns and formulas.

And his brain just seems to solve them automatically.

This is a little embarrassing for him — he seems, in fact, something like a non-native speaker who is constantly worried about getting his English wrong; his words tumble out, rapid-fire, but then are punctuated with long silences as he considers them — because he likes to think of himself as a regular guy.

### 'I was embarrassed by it'

Growing up in Skokie, he was, he says, "just basically an average student." He was a kid who had a hard time figuring out which shoe went on which foot. And, to this day, he doesn't do well at Trivial Pursuit or at remembering things that aren't interesting to him.

But he has been able, since he was 10, to manage complex calculations in his head at lightning speed.

"I remember staying up late, watching Johnny Carson," he says, "and I saw a guy on there who could tell you what day of the week any day in history was."

Byster thought it was a cool trick and figured out the mathematical formula behind it, which he quickly trotted out to impress his parents' friends. He soon started coming up with his own games, but mostly kept them private because although he liked the attention he got for showing off, he also felt people stepping back from him when they started thinking of him as some sort of genius.

He was a freshman finance major at the University of Illinois when a researcher there documented his abilities, but, he says, "I was embarrassed by it. That was about the time that 'Rain Man' came out . . . so everybody thought you were the guy in short pants with a pocket protector."



Retired Merc trader Mike Byster says he's more enthusiastic about helping kids learn math than he ever was about trading. —KEITH HALE/SUN-TIMES

Other than a few bar stunts, he mostly kept his gift to himself.

And, after graduation, when he started trading commodities, he found his abilities useful, but only to a point.

"There are 200 people in the [trading] pit, and every time someone made a move, I noted it," he says. "Pretty soon, I began to be able to predict . . . what people were going to do next and jump ahead. [A mastery of] the numbers helped when the market was going crazy, but that was 1 percent of the time."

"I did pretty well," Byster says of his career, "but there were a lot of guys who did better than me. They wanted it more."

A certain restlessness set in, he explains, and he felt like there was

something else he was meant to do. He started visiting the Niles North math class taught by his cousin, and he found the kids there a friendly and receptive audience for his mathematical party tricks.

"When kids see me do stuff like that," he says, "they say, 'Cool! How do you do that?' But when adults see it, they just say, 'I could never do that,' and shut down."

Byster decided to try to teach the kids some of his tricks. But, to do that, he had to figure out exactly how they worked.

"I'd take these long walks by the lake," he says, "and try to break it down, 'OK, what am I doing when I'm doing that? What do I do next?'"

This was something of a chal-

lenge for a guy whose brain works so fast he doesn't always know what it's doing.

### 'This could change the world'

After his long walks, Byster would stop in here, at Lulu's, for a bite to eat. He always orders either the pad thai or, as he has today, the wide rice noodles, but just because they're really good, he says, not, you know, because he's Rain Man-like in any way.

"I'd come here and grab a bite," he says, "and write things down really quickly."

A lot of his notes are on napkins because he often forgot to bring paper.

He figured out the tricks, patterns and shortcuts he uses in long division and the way he breaks multiplication problems down into parts, never doing more than multiplying a one-digit number by a one-digit number. Eventually, he simplified things enough that he could teach even learning disabled kids how to manage complex math and memory challenges. They can't generally go as fast as he can, but they can solve most of the same problems.

Now, he travels to almost 200 schools a year — one or two a day, whenever he can — to work with kids. He accepts no money for the visits but is working with two partners on turning his system into a business. He wants to create a worldwide online competition, "like a big spelling bee," with math problems and, eventually, some sort of Leap Frog-esque gadget that would help kids learn math.

He's more enthusiastic about this endeavor, he says, than he ever was about trading commodities.

"This could change the world," he says. "This is what I was meant to do."