

BBC Radio Interview:

"Outlook" -- January 2000

with Damien Fowler for the British Broadcasting Company and Christopher Langan, Gina LoSasso and Nik Lygeros for the Mega Foundation

BBC: If you ever try to get into a nightclub in New York and one of the security men, *or bouncers*, denies you entry, think twice before you try to argue your way in...especially if the bouncer's called Chris Langan, because he's been described as "the smartest man in America". His IQ, or intelligence quotient, has been put at a staggering 195. The human average, remember, is 100. University students tend to score about 120. But is having an IQ of nearly 200 a blessing or a curse? More on that shortly. But first, why is Chris Langan working as a nightclub bouncer?

CML: I had to do a lot of fighting when I was in high school. I had to defend my little brothers as well, who were also in for a lot of negative attention. It's not necessarily that I would have gravitated towards fighting a lot, it's just that that was my lot. I was more or less thrown into a mode of existence in which it was either fight or be stomped on...and I chose to fight. I've kind of carried that forward into my current life. I've been a bar bouncer for the last 20, 25 years now. I'd like to get out of it because I'm not by nature a violent person, I don't like to hurt other people. The reason I fought was mainly self-defense and to defend others who I cared about, who I thought were getting the short end of the stick.

There's a great dissonance, a great clash, there. You go to work, and you stand there and you're thinking about what you were thinking about before you came to work, which is, say, some kind of combinatorial mathematics, you're trying to prove in a theorem of some sort or another, and suddenly you come to a noisy place where people are screaming, yelling, drinks are being thrown. Eventually arguments start, there are fights, and you can't really keep your train of thought going in that kind of an environment, and it is painful to have to switch tracks all the time.

Others began getting wise to the fact that I had a higher than average intelligence level when I started talking at a very early age. Actually the first thing that I was drawn to was biology and zoology, but I found it a bit too soft and mushy for my taste, so I gravitated towards mathematics and logic...things of that sort.

I would have welcomed the chance to get out of the bouncing business years ago. But frankly, you know, even 15 years ago I was so sick of it I would have gotten out of it if somebody had offered me a good way to make a living that didn't take too much of my energy and allowed me to work on what I really cared about when I wasn't on the job. If you go to work for corporate America, unfortunately, usually they'll take so much of your time and energy that you have nothing left for writing books or doing any theorizing when you're not on the job. So I couldn't take one of those jobs. On the other hand, I did a lot of menial labor, things like construction, working in factories, being a cowboy, being a firefighter. All of these things take a great deal of your energy, and all you can do when you come home is just crash, just fall down and go to sleep. And if you find a half-hour a day to do any theorizing or any meaningful intellectual work your lucky at that rate. So it's, like I say, the bouncing was the lesser of evils.

There's something about people that you have to realize, something about IQ that you have to realize: a person doesn't have to have a super high IQ to be interesting because they can also have intellectual creativity as well. Often times, I find that even simplest people or people

that are regarded as being simple can say things that are entirely surprisingly interesting to me, that have a novelty to them, a newness that actually makes me sit up and take notice. Everybody has a microcosm in his or her head and they may have varying degrees of access to our true intellectual abilities and that may be measured by scores on certain kinds of tests. But, the fact of the matter is, at some point in time even, if I may say, if I may use such a term as, the stupidest man, can come up with something absolutely brilliant in a given context.

BBC: Chris Langan in New York for whom having an ultra-high IQ has not always been easy. So he and a few others have set up The Mega Foundation which came into being at the start of this month.

Joining us from the U.S. State of Connecticut, now, is another founding member of the organization, psychologist, Dr. Gina LoSasso, and from the French City of Lyon, we're joined by another member, Nik Lygeros.

Now, Gina let me start with you. We just heard Chris' story there, have you had similar problems?

GL: Well, it's very difficult growing up, being severely gifted. The reasons are many. You have a very complicated personality style. Gifted individuals, in addition to having a higher IQ, also are extremely empathic, emotionally, very sensitive, usually very creative, and fiercely independent. So we don't really do very well in school systems and occupational settings and so forth. ,Sure, I've had my own share of problems growing up.

BBC: It sounds particularly at the education stage in the younger years. Nik, what about yourself? Did you have, during your educational years, problems fitting in and feeling satisfied?

NL: Yes, very often I had a similar problem, but, in fact, it was rather different because, for me I was gifted always most in mathematics, so for the common people, mathematicians are already strange, so to be severely gifted is another way to be strange also.

BBC: Did you find that caused problems between you and other students, or even between you and the teachers?

NL: More with teachers, in fact.

BBC: Why was that? Did they...is it that they had a problem accepting your above-average, well, above-average abilities?

NL: Yes because they need to teach something to the majority, so if you are very, very different, they have to do their job in a different way. So it's a problem for them.

BBC: And they know that you could possibly challenge them if they get it wrong, that's a problem.

NL: Yes.

BBC: So they have to stay on their toes!

Gina, you used that phrase, "severely gifted." Is that a recognition that seems to be coming in over the last few years? Being gifted, being well above-average intelligence IS tricky because it causes all sorts of problems and we didn't sort of find...we didn't have that awareness before, did we?

GL: Well... I think the severely gifted did, but the general population, probably not. They see people who are intelligent or creative, and they think 'Oh great, they have talents. They don't need any help.' But the fact of the matter is, it's very difficult to negotiate a life that's geared towards, as Nik was pointing out, a school system that's geared towards the average student,

and is often held to the pace of the slowest student. It can be just mind-bogglingly frustrating to sit in a classroom and be bored silly every day. So... I mean there's a lot of pluses. At no point would I ever trade my abilities. I really feel empowered, that I can do anything that I set my mind to. But, it is a mixed blessing, it makes social interactions difficult and it makes educational and occupational settings very difficult.

BBC: So then you, in The Mega Foundation, argue that early recognition is crucial?

GL: Early recognition is very important...you see, gifted children--severely gifted children--can have difficulty fitting in with their peer group. They're more like little adults. And they don't fit in with adults either, because they are, after all, children. If we can identify them we can hook them up with each other so they can have a mutual support system with the resources that they need, so they don't have to flounder in the educational system.

BBC: So is that something that The Mega Foundation hopes to do, help link up young children with each other as early as possible?

GL: Oh absolutely. Just as we started the Ultranet, the global Hi-Q network on January 1st, we're starting, next month, the Telenet, which is the Telemach Network for Gifted Youth, which is going to run along the same lines. It's a forum for exchange of ideas, and mutual support, and insight into resources, and so forth. And then directly following that, we will initiate our mentor program.

BBC: But where does ultra high IQ start? What's the benchmark in IQ terms?

GL: Well in IQ terms we generally think of severely gifted as being an IQ of 164 or above but that's not...we don't have a specific cut-off for the people that we're looking to bring together. And the reason is that IQ scores are limited in what they measure and they can be suppressed for a number of reasons, including poverty, abuse, depression. So that what we're looking for is an individual who shows not only intelligence, but also creativity, depth of thinking, original ideas, and so forth.

BBC: Nik, when you bump into people can you tell whether they have a high IQ, an ultra-high IQ?

NL: Quite difficult question, but yes. I think so, because it's a different way to think, so you can make rather quickly the difference.

BBC: Not necessarily something you can measure, just sometimes...something you can perceive.

NL: Yes, more like this. In fact you don't measure at all. I think there's a different character to this aspect, so you perceive this aspect.

BBC: Just one final thought. We were talking about schooling just now. Is it also difficult to find job satisfaction, Nik?

NL: Yes, of course.

BBC: We heard it from Chris Langan. What about in your case?

NL: That's rather strange because I work in the Department of Mathematics, but I have also a similar problem because, you see, when some mathematician, even a professional, takes months to solve something and he didn't manage to solve, in fact, this and he comes and asks you, "Can you help me?" and he sees that in a few days that you finished the problem. So it's very difficult for him to accept, for example, the co-publication with you and sometimes he leaves the article to you!

BBC: Nik Lygeros in Lyon, and Gina LoSasso, thank you both very much indeed for joining us. And just briefly, The Mega Foundation is on the Internet at www.megafoundation.org.
