

★ The
plain
English
guide
to PCs

PCReview

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THE BOSS

At age eight,
Gaven Cohen
started his own
dial-in service

LEON PERLMAN meets the country's
youngest bulletin board operator

WHEN Gaven Cohen returns from school, modem, the on-line bug bit hard. The modem, laptop and fax line



his PC. Not to play games, mind you. He's got a more purposeful mission: he's a system operator, or "sysop", of a bulletin board — South Africa's youngest.

Gaven's foray into computing began at the age of five with exploratory sessions on the family's Apple II+. By the age of eight he had figured out how to hack past the password protection to get into his father, Stewart Cohen's Toshiba laptop.

And when he discovered how to operate his father's

sessions of dialling in to Beltel and exploring bulletin boards.

At the age of eight, Gaven decided he wanted to start his own bulletin board. He needed a computer, so he hijacked his dad's laptop. Dad resorted to locking the laptop away, but after an exhausting cat and mouse game, conceded defeat and bought his son his own PC.

"Basically I bought him a PC to get mine back," says Stewart. And there was another positive spin-off: he realised that his clothing company, which had invested heavily in computing technology, was now getting a resident computer expert.

Gaven is now a mature thirteen, a hardened computer expert with years of PC experience, running a bulletin board called "Cool BBS" from his bedroom. He's also a budding entrepreneur with the business savvy of someone twice his

age: he's planning to launch his own mail-order business.

Gaven's long given up on traditional hobbies, disdaining stamp collecting because he "got tired of peeling stamps off letters". His



Maestro and control deck: Gaven and his Pentium

PHOTOGRAPH: NICK BOTHMA

room is scattered with the tell-tale signs of a computing aficionado: legions of computer hardware, hard drives hanging from dismembered PC's, bulging boxes of the latest software occupying his bookshelves, a PC that's switched on 24 hours a day, computer magazines scattered all over the floor and a bank of modems and telephone lines.

He's even roped his family into his world by wiring up the rooms in the house to create a domestic computer network. He assembles school projects in minutes using his library of educational CD-ROMs, and speaks with authority on most computing related topics.

His principal at Herzlia School in Cape Town even gives him special permission to attend major hardware and software product launches, while professors from the University of Cape Town have been known to call him for advice.

The skill comes from spending up to seven hours each day — "Who has time for girls when you have to be a sysop of a bulletin board?" — glued to his PC, a brand new, state-of-the-art 90 MHz Pentium. He navigates complex set-up screens with ease, hacking away with typing skills that would amaze experienced touch typists.

Gaven's first attempt at a bulletin board was called "BBS 'R' US". And what are his most vivid memories of that time? "Getting my first — and only — subscriber, who paid R60 for the privilege of having me as the youngest sysop in the country," says Gaven, not missing a beat. "Besides that, it was coping with my first hard drive crash which was a bit of a nightmare."

Curiously, unlike most 13-year-olds, there's no sign of an addiction to games or videos. "I don't have the time, and besides, that's for kids," he says wryly.

His father concurs: "Because he has to communicate with users at an adult level, he is mature for his age. The typing has also improved his English tremendously."

"By the time I've finished matric," says Gaven, "I want to be able to bath in champagne."

☛ The data number for Cool BBS is (021) 761-8573. The voice "Hotline" number is (021) 762-7714

? For the benefit of readers who did not start using computers at the age of five: A bulletin board is a computer attached to the phone lines so that other people can dial in for information. Some systems are rather simple; Gaven's is not