

# Savant Garde

CHRISTINA KO MEETS BRAIN CONNOISSEUR ALLAN SNYDER, A MAN FAMED FOR HIS PROGRESSIVE, CONTROVERSIAL WORK ON AUTISM, AND FINDS OUT JUST WHAT'S ON HIS MIND

**A**LLAN SNYDER can make you a genius – for an hour, at least. ¶ To be precise, he has discovered a way to induce savant-like behaviour in non-autistics. The cognition expert could spend hours describing the nuances of this, but what it boils down to is this: autism sometimes coincides with the ability to perform unbelievable mental feats, and Snyder has shown that these tasks can be temporarily induced by sending electromagnetic impulses into the brain.

Ten minutes under the zapper is all it takes, and you can be brilliant at pretty much anything.

Dedicating time to investigating the building blocks of genius is pretty strange for a man who began his career in optical physics, and there's definitely an element of mad scientist to the professor; an air of erraticism that belies the lucid theories that rest below the surface of his wide-eyed stare. He has a tendency to lose his train of thought or speak tautologically, but amid the merry scatter is a voice that knows of what it speaks. He's done a documentary for the BBC, spoken at countless events, is a fellow of the Royal Society of London and has been interviewed for cover stories with everyone from *The New York Times* to *New Scientist*. For now, he spends his time working from the Centre for the Mind, a project founded in conjunction with the University of Sydney, a haven for him to continue his progressive, controversial studies.

“That the unconscious mind is more important than the conscious mind is a really interesting idea. Savants have the same skills as you and I, but they

have what I call ‘privileged access,’ due to a brain impairment. Turning off part of the brain allows certain people to access other skills – and that brings up a whole load of questions,” he muses.

For all his work with autism, Snyder is decidedly opposite to the hyperliteral autistic. He was born the token geek in a family of creatives: “It’s bizarre in a way. I saw science as creative freedom. I was lucky. I was able to work across a number of fields. I still don’t know what I’ll do when I grow up,” he says, explaining how he has gone from optical physicist to brain guru to inspirational speaker.

Snyder is in town to promote the launch of MindChamps, an education centre that preaches creativity over pure academics. “You have to learn the rules first... and then you can break them,” he suggests. Savants are geniuses of execution, but the side effect is a lack of creative impulse. He believes creativity is of paramount importance in society’s advancement, a philosophy that he advocates in his book *What Makes a Champion*, in which he interviews greats from Nelson Mandela to Sir Edmund Hillary to Baz Luhrmann.

It’s interesting that a teaching centre would choose a scientist to lobby on its behalf, but Snyder’s motivational concepts have impressed others. At Sydney, his “What Makes a Champion” lecture was a cultural event in the run-up to the Olympics, and the theme will be carried on in an open forum before Beijing launches its Games.

Lecturing to a room of education bigwigs, Snyder sways his focus from the technical to the motivational. “Motivational speakers are kind of fluffy, because they’ve never really done anything outstanding intellectually. But I took the liberty today because I thought my background might give me a little licence to do that,” he says.

It is clear, from the group that gathers to listen in on the interview, waiting to invite him to a late supper, thrusting forth name cards to receive copies of the printed product, that Snyder has nothing to worry about. His audience is captive, their mindset fixed. He is, in their eyes, a champion. ■

## AT A GLANCE

### PROVENANCE

Philadelphia, USA

### CHILDHOOD

### AMBITION

“To do something that was an intellectual contribution”

### HEROES

Copernicus, for changing the notion that we’re the centre of the universe; Gandhi, for bringing the fact that we could have a peaceful revolution; Roger Bannister, for beating the four-minute mile and breaking physiological barriers