

this WEEK LIFE

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NIAGARA *this week*

BY PAUL FORSYTH
STAFF

To say Austin Mardon's life has been an adventure is an understatement if ever there's been one.

In 1986, when he was 24 years old, the Alberta resident took part in a two-month NASA scientific expedition searching for meteorites in the Antarctic, during which he suffered frostbite and nerve damage serious enough that his doctor warned him he could lose a leg.

He had a personal audience with Pope John Paul II, authored dozens of scientific books and papers in his field of geography, underwent a terrifying ordeal when Soviet agents questioned him during a trip to the former Soviet Union and had the Order of Canada pinned to his lapel by Canada's governor general. His promising academic career came to a crashing halt with the onset of schizophrenia 16 years ago.

Mardon, who will speak at an event hosted by the Canadian Mental Health Association's Niagara branch and the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario Thursday at the Peninsula Ridge Coach House at 5600 King St. West in Beamsville from 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., believes the stresses of the Antarctic trip, the Soviet interrogation and returning home to be rejected when he proposed to his girlfriend all contributed to the onset of schizophrenia. He was sipping on a cup of tea in a bar near the University of Alberta when something in his mind simply snapped. Disembodied voices were all around him.

"It was like my head just exploded," said Mardon, who suddenly believed he was telepathic and a werewolf.

Schizophrenia, which has nothing to do with 'split personality,' as it's often confused with, can produce powerful hallucinations and delusions like those Mardon experienced, and what are known as 'negative' symptoms — severe depression, lack of motivation and apathy so crushing that even getting the energy to brush your teeth is almost too much to bear. Although it usually strikes males in their late teens or twenties, and females a few years later, it hit Mardon when he was 30.

Mardon was rushed to a hospital psychiatric ward and diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was switched from



Austin Mardon receives the Order of Canada from Governor General Michaëlle Jean last year.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Living with Schizophrenia

Mental illness has given Austin Mardon, who will be speaking at an event co-hosted by the Canadian Mental Health Association's Niagara branch and the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario, a different outlook on life, a life that he once thought was over

one medication to another, sometimes in combination, during a four-year period when he was consumed by apathy and lack of motivation.

Mardon's belief that his life was over, that he was a pathetic figure, began to slowly erode as he gradually began volunteering.

He's worked with the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta, was co-chair of *Unsung Heroes* — an Edmonton self-support group for people with schizophrenia — and works with the Alberta Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

For his work to help others struggling with mental illness, he has received numerous awards and citations, including the Order of Canada

last year. Last Sunday during a trip to Glasgow, Scotland he was inducted into the prestigious International Academy of Astronautics.

In a strange way, developing schizophrenia meant Mardon's impact on others was greater than it would have otherwise been if he'd continued his academic career uninterrupted, he said.

"I would have preferred I hadn't developed the disorder, he said. "(But) because of my disability I've helped a lot of people."

Mardon, who recently married, is an advocate for people with schizophrenia staying on their prescribed antipsychotic medications, which can often quell and control the symptoms. Mardon, who lives on a

modest disability pension, can't work because stress can trigger symptoms that are often hovering in the background. For instance, he sometimes thinks Canada's federal spy agency is bugging his phone, and sometimes believes the television is speaking to him.

"They're always there," he said. His wife, Catherine, has advice for him when that happens.

"She says to turn off the TV or hang up the phone," he said.

Mardon's message when he speaks to people is that despite the limitations of living with schizophrenia, people shouldn't feel like they can't have a rewarding life.

"It's accepting that you have limitations," he said. "I don't mean laying

down and dying.

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