



Exploding The Phone

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Abstract Article describing Joe Engressia's 1968 troubles with the phone company and USF.

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Notes Written around 1970 or so as it describes Engressia as 20 years old and that the USF whistling incident was "two years ago." Dateline Miami. We do not know what newspaper this appeared in.

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Blind student's perfect pitch rings the bell

By IAN GLASS

North American
Newspaper Alliance

MIAMI — As a boy, Joe Engressia could tell what denomination of coin had been flipped by the sound it made as it hit the floor. He could even tell in which year it had been minted by recognizing the silver content.

The incredible sensitivity of Engressia, 20, who has been blind since birth, is being investigated by a University of South Florida psychology professor, Harold L. Hawkins.

Dr. Hawkins was given a \$5,000 grant from the National Institute of Mental Health for just that purpose.

Engressia's specialty is the telephone, about which he probably knows more than anyone since Alexander Graham Bell.

When a phone rings, he can tell from which exchange it is coming. By the feel of the instrument, he can tell in which year it was made.

He knows how to make a



Joe Engressia

free call to anywhere in the world. Given a couple of

days of research, he reckons he could work out how to

contact anyone — President Nixon on his bedside phone, or the Pentagon's highly secret hot line.

Says Dr. Hawkins: "I'm trying to find out what is the limit of Joe's skill and whether it is an inherent, undeveloped trait others could use.

It was his talent that got Engressia in trouble with the university and the Federal Bureau of Investigation two years ago. He was temporarily suspended for making free long-distance phone calls for his friends by imitating the dialing equipment.

He did it by whistling a sequence of tones into the mouthpiece. The long-distance relays reacted to the particular frequencies he made, for Engressia has perfect pitch. He can reproduce any sound frequency impeccably, no matter how long it has been since he heard it.

The F. B. I. finally ruled that no federal statute had been violated ("I promised I wouldn't do it any more"), and an astonished General Telephone Co. offered him a

job, which he refused, preferring to major in mathematics at the university.

Engressia says he discovered his talent when he was 8 by accidentally whistling into the phone and cutting off the operator.

His blindness is of little handicap (he also has a built-in radar instinct that prevents him from ever bumping into things.) He will board a bus by himself, go to a city and ask to be shown around the local telephone exchange.

Often, he is able to warn the phone company officials of impending problems in their equipment by listening to the electronic tones.

"See," he says, "I'm not trying to beat the system when I accidentally get an overseas phone call free; I'm just trying to learn and to help. Eventually, I'd like to start my own phone company.

"Excuse me, I have to go now. I promised a friend I'd balance his stereo equipment for him."