



Exploding The Phone

db988

www.explodingthephone.com

Bibliographic Cover Sheet

Title **The Child in a Man**

Publication *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

Date 1991-09-19

Author(s) Monaghan, George

V/I/P p. 1E

Abstract Describes Joybubbles and his decision to become a five-year-old child.

Keywords Joe Engressia; Joybubbles

The following pages may contain copyrighted material. We believe that our use of this material for non-commercial educational and research purposes constitutes "fair use" under Section 107 of U.S. Copyright Law. If you wish to use this material for purposes that go beyond "fair use," you must obtain permission from the copyright owner, if any. While it will make us slightly sad to do so, we will nonetheless comply with requests from copyright owners who want their material removed from our web site.

Welcome [Log in](#) [Member Center](#)Search GO [Help](#)

Published: September 19, 1991

Section: VARIETY

Page#: 01E

THE CHILD IN A MAN

By George Monaghan; Staff Writer

When he was a small boy, Joe Engressia was so good at mathematics and had such an encyclopedic knowledge of electronics and telephone circuitry that he figured he would grow up to be a theoretical mathematician.

People would say to him, "What a nice little boy!"

And Joe, bristling, would spit out something arcanelly mathematical or electronic like:

"The formula for an inductive capacitive resonant circuit is $F = \frac{1}{2\pi \sqrt{LC}}$ where L is the inductance in henries and C is the capacitance in farads and F is the frequencies in cycles per second."

But things didn't work as mathematically as he thought they would. Engressia, who was born blind, didn't become a math professor or an electronics engineer.

Instead, he grew up to be a child. And his name isn't Joe Engressia anymore. It's Joybubbles, legally changed and listed in the phone book that way.

It took Joybubbles a lifetime to become 5 years old. His biological age is 42, but he says that doesn't mean a thing.

"I've decided never to grow up, because growing up can be boring, and there are too many things grownup people can't do. I was playing with dolls once, and someone told me, 'You have to be a fool to do that,' and I said, 'OK, I'll be a fool,' and it fit. It was comfortable.

"Grownups should have the right to daydream, talk to themselves and do nothing. They should have the right to have toys and to listen to bubbles and hear them sizzle and to put a pea up to their ears and listen to what it says, or listen to the trees."

His small apartment in a high-rise near downtown Minneapolis is scattered with hundreds of toys he has bought now and then on toy-shopping sprees - stuffed animals, dolls, balls, a big toy parachute, a toy telephone and four real telephones, two on the couch next to him and a couple more on tables within his reach.

He has a table full of tapes of children's songs. He has tapes of every "Mr. Rogers" show except No. 1259. He says he's getting that one soon.

The radio plays constantly. It is tuned to 1280 AM, Radio AAHS, one of the few stations in the country devoted to programs and songs and poems for kids. Joybubbles always tapes AAHS programs. He even appears on the station sometimes, reading his own poems over the air.

Joybubbles is as plump as a Buddha in his AAHS T-shirt with a pink unicorn on its front. As he talks, his dark eyes roll slowly.

It's hard to pin down exactly when he became a child, Joybubbles says. It came on him gradually until, one day in June 1988, it all came together in a moment of inspiration.

"I said, 'I am a child,' and it felt right and powerful. When I put 'I Am Joybubbles' in the phone book (he's since dropped the 'I Am') I knew I was making a commitment to it. And one of the big things then was that I learned to swing on a swing, and I began changing all my (Braille) magazines. And so instead of Fortune and Social Work and Psychology Today and all those serious adult magazines, I got Boy's Life, Jack & Jill, Ranger Rick, National Geographic World and even Parenting."

StarTribune Archives[About the archives](#)[Archives fees](#)[Archives search form](#)[Archives search tips](#)[Archives help and feedback](#)[Search for recent articles](#)**More resources**[Back copies](#)[Photo reprints](#)[Reprint requests](#)[Special projects](#)[Site map](#)

Instead of work, work, work, he plays, plays, plays. It's creative and astonishing, he says. It's a religion to him.

Years before coming to Minneapolis in 1982, he studied scriptures and philosophy and even got a ministerial certificate from what he calls a "community of spiritual seekers" in Florida.

He didn't know it then, he says, but that is when he began growing into childhood. By the time he was living in Minneapolis, childhood made deeper roots. He knew that, because when he went to spiritual retreats, he began singing to trees by himself.

Then he learned how to use a swing and began going on toy binges, and the idea came to him full-blown: He was a 5-year-old.

"It's no accident," he says, "that the only difference between play and pray is one letter. Children have a handle on natural things, the joy of the simple, the beauty of play.

"It's something we lose by growing up. But it is rightfully ours, and if we choose we can get back to it, and so part of my ministry is to help people find it again.

"People can have a little magic in their lives, like finding your favorite tree and singing to it or talking to it. It's therapy. And trees charge a lot less than (therapists) do."

A couple of years ago he was in the studios of Radio Station AAHS, and he met Gail Limbacher of Burnsville, who writes children's stories.

"Hi, I'm Joybubbles," Joybubbles said. "I'm 5 years old."

"I'm Gail," said Limbacher, whose chronological age is 37. "And I'm 7."

They shook hands and became phone friends, talking on the phone nearly every day and talking about life as children, making up stories for each other and laughing about the kinds of things kids like to laugh about, wallowing in pools full of Jell-O, for instance, or talking about their adventures with imaginary friends.

They have become children again. Joybubbles has a name for it - re-childing. That is what his "ministry" is all about.

Joybubbles' only income is from the Social Security disability pension that has supported him much of his adult (and child) life. The nearest he comes to grownup ideas of work is figuring out telephone circuit problems by hooking into circuits around the country and listening for defects.

But that's play. He's learning, and when you play, he says, you learn.

Most of the time, if he is not outside playing on a swing or with some kids, he sits on the couch in his little apartment and talks to his hundreds of phone friends.

Sometimes they read him children's stories, and he recites his poems for them. Mostly they talk about anything, from "cats to hurricanes" to the technical intricacies of the telephone system - hundreds of people, day and night, calling from all around the country.

The telephone has been central to Joybubbles' life since he was a small boy. It was his access to the rest of the world, and as he grew, it became his compulsion. He was isolated, and the phone set him free.

Joybubbles has a sister, also blind, who lives in Florida. His father, a school photographer, moved the family around the country from job to job. He used to beat his wife, and when that happened Joybubbles would get on the phone and listen to the dial tone until it was all over. When he was 6 or 7 his constant dialing used to drive his baby sitter crazy, and so she found a lock to fit the rotary dial.

That didn't stop him. He discovered that by clicking the hang-up switch rapidly enough, he could reach phone numbers without dialing them. By the time he was in his early 20s he was a master of the telephone system, dubbed the "granddaddy" of all "phone phreaks"

in an article in Esquire magazine.

From his dorm at the University of South Florida he was dialing calls all over the world for free. And at the same time he was learning. In seconds, he says, he could get an answer to a

phone-electronics problem that might take an engineer with a book hours. He could use a pay phone to dial a call to London, trick the circuitry into routing it back through Omaha, Neb., and in a few seconds the phone in the booth next to him would be ringing with his call.

Ron Rosenbaum, the writer who did the Esquire "phone phreak" story, sketched a picture of Joe Engressia that still fits Joybubbles. Surrounded by his phones, Rosenbaum said, Joe is sitting in his small apartment in Memphis, Tenn., "like a blind spider . . . receiving messages from every tendril of his web."

He has perfect pitch, and he could whistle into a phone and cause it to dial by the sound of his whistle. He was zinging calls everywhere. Once he got some fellow phone phreaks together for a conference call to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, where Joybubbles, using an impressive radio-announcer voice, conducted a bogus talk show with an embassy guard.

It was a blast, he said, that ended one day in Memphis when he got arrested for theft of service, and was given a suspended sentence. That ended his days as a leader of the phone phreaks, but not his interest in the telephone.

After living for a while in Denver, he decided to move to Minneapolis. People told him the city was a friendly and tolerant place. He'd never been in Minneapolis before, didn't know anyone and didn't need to as long as he had his telephones nearby.

He moved to the city on June 12, 1982, a date he chose because 612 is the Twin Cities' area code.

His first task in the city was to begin weaving a web of phone lines. He advertised in shopper publications for people who just wanted a little friendly talk, and he began getting calls from hundreds of people around the clock.

One phone line he established in those days was "Zizzerific," and one of his frequent callers was Julie Lindquist, then 14, who lives in New Hope and now works in the Pinwheel Day Care Center in New Hope.

"We just talked," she said. "We talked about anything; his life, my life, and soon I was reading children's books to him, preschool books, and read quite a few of them, and we became friends."

She also told other people about Joybubbles. One was her day-care boss, Kathy Hammerseng.

Julie told Kathy to call Joybubbles. Soon he was traveling out to the day-care center to entertain the kids with his load of toys and his parachute and his children's songs and poems.

That's the way Joybubbles' network works. People hear about him, meet him by chance, or call him.

In the last couple of weeks one caller phoned him from Hawaii, by the edge of the ocean. A man called him from a cellular phone on a roller coaster in Boston. A terminally ill boy in Florida called him about his dream to ride a horse. One woman called and said she didn't want to talk at all, really, she wanted to cry, and so Joybubbles cried with her.

"When I talk to people and tell them my name I hear an extra little lilt in their voices," he says. "They start getting all excited about children's stories. They begin talking about toys. And I've found out that a lot more people than you'd think have toys, and they play with them, even if they don't admit it."

He calls them "closet re-childers." They are growing up to be children.

[Copyright 2006](#) Star Tribune. All rights reserved.

[Feedback](#)|[Terms of Use](#)|[Privacy Policy](#)|[Member Center](#)|[Company Site](#)|[Company Directory & Contacts](#)|[Company Jobs](#)|[Advertising Information](#)|[Newspaper Subscriptions & Service](#)|[eEdition](#)|[Classroom Newspapers](#)

425 Portland Av. S., Minneapolis, MN 55488 (612) 673-4000