

GRASP is ALL over this piece

IN THE SUBWAYS

Imprisoned by impulses



COMMENTARY
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Iwalk by the trains all the time," Darius McCollum was saying on the phone last night. "I thought, 'Why can't I go on the trains and be a regular passenger?' Well, it worked for awhile."

McCollum, 39, has spent more than a third of his adult life locked up, his current stay aboard an 800-bed jail barge on the East River.

Since he was a high school freshman in Queens, McCollum has been in and out of jail for impersonating a New York City Transit worker. He has repeatedly fooled riders, subway employees and the police into believing him part of the transit system.

McCollum first got caught at the controls of a subway train at the age of 15, delivering E train riders along six stops in Manhattan. Over the years, he befriended transit employees and attended NYC Transit workers' rallies. Sometimes, he cleared debris from tracks and extinguished fires. Once, he volunteered as a tour guide at the Transit Museum.

Wearing a transit-issue safety vest and hard hat, McCollum was arrested last week at the Long Island Rail Road yard in Jamaica — two months after being released from jail on a parole violation. He carried a key that would have started one of the LIRR's new M-7 locomotives.

"This is one of the most clearest and shining examples of what can happen when Asperger's doesn't get treated," said Michael Carley, executive director of the Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership, a Manhattan support group. "This is a guy who is not a criminal."

Asperger's is a neurological



Darius McCollum, a victim of Asperger Syndrome?

disorder similar to autism. It is sometimes marked by a consuming fascination with things like trains.

Though McCollum exhibits telltale symptoms, his treatment has consisted entirely of jail time.

"They don't know what to do with him," said Lori Shery, who knows McCollum and runs the New Jersey-based Asperger Syndrome Education Network. "They don't have a clue."

A source familiar with McCollum's recent incarceration said prison health professionals doubted that he suffers from Asperger's. McCollum was released from prison in

April. In his pocket was a letter from the Social Security Administration, denying him disability benefits because he had no work history.

A few times, he attended Carley's support group meetings. He was also working on getting a high school equivalency diploma.

"It was surprising he lasted as long as he did," before being arrested again, said the source familiar with McCollum's prison history. "He may have spent more time on the inside than on the outside at this point in his life."

When McCollum was sentenced in 2001 for impersonating a transit worker, Judge

Carol Berkman in State Supreme Court in Manhattan doubted Asperger's was his problem.

The judge said she read about Asperger's on the Internet and concluded that he did not exhibit some important symptoms, including social dysfunction. He had many friends, she said. She also dismissed the notion that McCollum couldn't control his impulses, a common Asperger symptom.

"This man is a danger," she said. "But in the meantime, we've made him a poster boy for the system's lack of compassion for the mentally ill. Well, I have a lot of compassion for the mentally ill. You know, we don't lock them up anymore."

Berkman sentenced McCollum to 2½ to 5 years in prison.

"Darius is a very articulate, super intelligent guy who, because he's had absolutely no supports throughout his life or no knowledge of his own Asperger's, all of his intelligence has been channeled into this one thing," Carley said.

McCollum seems to lack the capacity to understand the seriousness of his actions. "Darius does not seem to have a real great understanding of why it is that he shouldn't be doing this and what the consequences are," said Shery, who is trying to find a lawyer to take McCollum's case pro bono.

Carley, who along with his young son was diagnosed with Asperger's in 2000, said about 400 people attend his meetings three times a month. Half experienced some fascination with trains sometime in their lives.

"In essence, trains are basically the feeling of going forward, which we all want in our lives, but we don't have to make decisions as to which way to turn," he said. "It's all been decided: We're on a track."

Last night, in a brief phone conversation, McCollum admitted again that he needs help. "I need help desperately. I know the seriousness of this."