

WISE GUY



Christopher Langan spends his downtime coming up with a solution to a problem that philosophers and scientists have pondered for thousands of years.

Photo by: Robert Adam Mayer

He's a working class guy with an IQ that's off the charts. What does he have to say about science? Everything -- a theory of everything, that is.

by John R. Quain

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Christopher Langan has been a bouncer for nearly two decades. And if you were to walk into the Westhampton Grill on New York's Long Island, where he works part-time, you'd think that Langan, just shy of 6 feet and weighing in at a powerful 270 pounds, looks the part. But Langan isn't your average bar bouncer: He's scored as high as 195 on IQ tests, a result so rare that experts estimate that fewer than one in a billion people can achieve it. A score of 100 is considered average and most university graduates come in at about 120. But despite his obvious smarts, Langan never managed to finish college. Growing up, he struggled with poverty and led a fairly blue-collar existence. He's held all sorts of jobs, ranging from construction worker to cowboy, firefighter to farmhand.

In recent years, Langan has achieved some notoriety through articles in magazines such as Esquire and with an appearance on ABC's "20/20." But you're not likely to see Langan on the next episode of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" That's because he's busy thinking about science and its ability to describe the world we live in. Presently, he's writing a book, Design for a Universe, about a theory he's been working on for well more than a decade -- a theory that encompasses all other theories. We caught up with Langan to find out just what the big idea is.

Popular Science When people hear you have such an extraordinary IQ, do they bug you with questions?

Chris Langan Oh yeah, people ask me for advice all the time: legal advice, medical advice, advice on their stock portfolios. A newspaper just sent me 40 questions they wanted me to answer.

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You know, basic questions like, Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Most people don't think you can answer a question like that, but it's actually very easy. Modern genetic science tells us that mutations distinguishing new species from their parent species occur in germ cells [cells like sperm and egg that are involved in reproduction] and not somatic cells [the rest of the body's cells]. So for the most interesting version of that question -- which came first, the chicken or an egg containing a chicken? -- the answer is the egg. But sometimes the questions are absurd or ridiculous, and I have a hard time with that.

PS What started you thinking about a theory of everything?

CL Actually, it hit me at a very early age that once you figured out how a theory was constructed and what the theory represented, and why the theory should be able to represent something at all, further explanation is hard to come by. On the other hand, if science is a valid enterprise, there must be an explanation for it.

PS Was there something that you read that piqued your interest?

CL Just about everything. I remember taking books by authors like Bertrand Russell and Einstein with me to the ranch when I was a kid. I can remember being 13 or 14 years old, reading that stuff in the fields as I waited for the irrigation ditches to drain.

PS There are obviously a lot of problems to work on -- in biomedical research or astrophysics, say -- so why worry about this?

CL I guess I did this because it was very plain to me that, unlike the other fields you mentioned, this one was being sadly neglected. And I wanted to do something truly original; I suppose we all do.

PS Are there drawbacks to being so smart?

CL It's easy to get bored with routine and hard to extract gratification from normal conversation, at least with most members of the bar crowd. So why am I still functioning on that level? It's a nagging question. On the other hand, the bar scene is not without its amenities. Everybody needs to get out now and then.

PS Well, you do have some fun?

CL Oh, yes. Sometimes I do have fun. Have a couple of beers, shoot the bull with the guys. That kind of thing. And I've got a customized Harley-Davidson Sportster. It's fast and loud, a pleasure to ride when I can find the time.

PS What other sorts of things are you working on these days?

CL I'm also the director of research for Virtual LogistiX, a computer software company. I've been working in a two-car garage with these guys going on two years now, and things are just starting to really take off. We're into some very exciting projects, including a new kind of search-and-edit technology for databases. My girlfriend and I also run a nonprofit foundation for the gifted, called the Mega Foundation.

PS Does that mean the end of working as a bouncer at the Westhampton Grill?

CL I don't know if it's the total end of the Westhampton Grill. The owner is a friend, so I try to help him out whenever the need arises. As far as relying on it for money, hopefully that won't be necessary in the near future. But as of right now, I need the job.

Chris's websites:
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