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Drawn to Trains, a Well-Traveled Fanatic Is Back in Trouble

By MICHAEL LUO

By now, Darius McCollum's exploits have become the stuff of city lore.

He is the eccentric transit fanatic from Queens who has spent more than a third of his life behind bars for transgressions related to his posing as a New York City Transit worker. Among the notable offenses on his rap sheet are commandeering an E train on a trip to the World Trade Center from Herald Square when he was just 15 and taking a number of city buses for joy rides.

He has long vexed transit officials, who posted his picture at stations and depots. But to a small band of dedicated supporters and friends, Mr. McCollum is the ultimate example of the system's failing someone who badly needs help.

On Friday, Mr. McCollum, now 39, was arrested again, just two months after being re-

leased from jail after being held on a parole violation related to his latest transit-related conviction, his 19th.

His mother, Elizabeth McCollum, who has struggled to make sense of his obsession for years, said yesterday that she blamed him for his latest troubles. "Darius brought this on himself," she said. "He flubbed it himself."

He had just spent three and a half years behind bars for sneaking into a subway control tower at 57th Street, tripping the emergency brakes on an N train and descending to the tracks in a transit authority uniform to sort out the mess.

This time, according to the criminal complaint that has been filed against him by the Queens district attorney's office and transit officials, Mr. McCollum walked into the Long Island Rail Road's train yard in Ja-



Brendan Barnum, 2003

Darius McCollum has spent years in jail.

maica, Queens, wearing an orange reflector vest and a hard hat, around noon on Friday.

When a railroad worker asked him who he was, he produced a business card that identified him as a captain and an independent railroad safety consultant. He then asked to

talk to workers from Bombardier, the company that manufactures trains for the subway, the L.I.R.R. and Metro-North, the complaint said. The employee sent him over to a group from Bombardier that was in the yard.

Mr. McCollum identified himself to the group, again explaining that he was a safety consultant, the complaint said, and began asking a series of questions about the safety mechanisms of the new M-7 locomotives, which the railroad has rolled out in the last few years.

When the worker who first spotted him began getting suspicious and asked him for more identification, Mr. McCollum walked quickly out of the yard, the complaint said. Workers called the Metropolitan Transport

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tation Authority police, who arrested him nearby.

After searching him, the police found several railroad-related keys, including one that would have started an M-7 locomotive nearby and others that would have allowed him to operate other equipment in the yard, the complaint said.

Mr. McCollum is now being held in \$250,000 bail, charged with attempted grand larceny, criminal impersonation, possession of stolen property, trespassing and possession of burglar's tools.

Mr. McCollum's supporters, who rallied behind him after his last arrest, say that he suffers from a social disorder similar to autism, known as Asperger's syndrome.

The disorder is also called "the little professor syndrome." Its sufferers often become obsessed with specific topics, talking endlessly about them with stunning expertise; they have problems socializing, make inappropriate comments and avoid eye contact. Obsession with trains and train trivia is common among sufferers of Asperger's.

Typically, the syndrome is diagnosed in childhood. Less is known about adult sufferers. The judge in Mr. McCollum's last criminal case rejected Asperger's as a defense, and sentenced him to two and a half to five years in prison.

Mr. McCollum's lawyer in that case, Stephen C. Jackson, said yesterday that he later asked a psychiatrist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Dr. John Pomeroy, to examine his client in prison. Dr. Pomeroy, he said, gave Mr. McCollum a diagnosis of Asperger's.

Reached by telephone yesterday, Dr. Pomeroy did not dispute Mr. Jackson's claim but declined to confirm the diagnosis, citing patient confidentiality. He did confirm examining Mr. McCollum in prison.

Mr. McCollum was paroled earlier this year. Originally, he was supposed to go to North Carolina, where his parents, Samuel and Elizabeth, live, friends said yesterday. But in the end, they got into an argument because he wanted to bring his wife, Nelly Rodriguez, an Ecuadorean immigrant he had met on a subway platform just before he went to prison and married while behind bars, the friends said.

The two went up to Albany to look for an apartment, and he called his parole officer to tell him, his friends said. But one of the conditions of his parole was that he not leave the New

York City area, so he was sent back to jail for 90 days. In April, he was released again.

Since then, his supporters have been scrambling to line up help for him. Lori Shery, who runs an Asperger's advocacy group in Edison, N.J., arranged for him to attend a support group that met three times a month on the Upper West Side and was trying to find a therapist for him.

Mr. McCollum attended the group a few times but stopped coming over in the last few months, said Michael Carley, who ran the group. Mr. Carley said he tried to steer Mr. McCollum away from talking about trains to why he liked them so much, a change that helps many sufferers begin to resist their impulses. Mr. McCollum was showing signs of progress before he stopped coming, he said.

Daisy Quinteros, 29, Mr. McCollum's stepdaughter, lived with her mother, Ms. Rodriguez, and Mr. McCollum, who she called Dario, on the Lower East Side.

She described him yesterday as raro, meaning "strange." He and her mother argued constantly, usually about his obsession, she said.

"Sometimes he would come home with all these things connected to trains," she said. "Keys, tools, a uniform."

This time, the charges involve the Long Island Rail Road.

Mr. McCollum's friends said they thought that he might be able to channel his obsession into a job where he could use his extensive knowledge, and he told them that he was looking for work as a transportation consultant, although he never got his high school diploma.

Jude Domski, a theater director who produced a play based on his life and later became his friend, said yesterday that about a week before his arrest, he stopped by her apartment in a hard hat. He also told her that he had a reflector vest and that he needed the gear for safety classes he was taking for an internship with a transportation organization. She did not know, she said, whether to believe him.

The morning before his arrest, Ms. Shery said, Mr. McCollum told her he got into a fight with his mother. He left in a huff, so he went to the train yard.

"It usually makes me feel better," she said he told her.

Anthony DePalma contributed reporting for this article.