



John Kass

A true genius won't get grant, just the cheers

A few days ago, the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation awarded its yearly and prestigious "genius grants" to a couple of dozen obscure intellectuals.

Allegedly, they'll help humanity with their brainpower. So, one plays the trombone. Another nerd studies extinct plants. A third is an economist who just started shaving. Another is an artist who sticks glass beads together, and so on.

They're all deliriously happy, because each was handed \$500,000 to spend with no strings attached.

So what does this prove?

It proves the MacArthur Foundation folks know diddly about finding true genius.

They ignored Marty Marcuccilli.

Marty, 58, is a salesman who lives in Roselle. He's a genius because he solved a problem that has plagued millions of Americans, like me:

How to order blue cheese stuffed olives for that perfect martini, while not worrying about how the bartender was going to jam the cheese up in there.

Most of us didn't want to know the details.

"I think I'm a genius as much as those other people," Marty said. "What I invent-

ed, well, it's a real genius thing. No doubt in my mind."

Why?

"Everybody who sees my invention smacks their head and says, 'Why didn't I think of this?'"

"I look at them and say, 'You know why you didn't think of this? 'Cause you're not a genius, like me.'"

Marty invented the Olive Express, a small, lightweight plastic device you can hold in one hand.

It takes about two seconds to stuff an olive with the Olive Express, saving bartenders time and aggravation. Some outfit called Spill-Stop manufacturing, in Melrose Park, sells it for around \$20.

There is a patent pending to discourage copycats and thieves. Since they're in Melrose Park, and since Marty was born on Grand Avenue, I wouldn't try anything cute.

The Olive Express is only available to bartenders, but soon you'll find it in stores.

And unlike the MacArthur Foundation winners—especially the glass bead artist—the Olive Express actually helps humans.

"Everybody drinks martinis," he said. "But it takes bartenders too long to stuff the olives. With my Olive Express, it takes seconds."

You press it into a container of blue cheese, filling a short tube. Insert the tube into the olive, press the handle, the cheese is injected. A work of art anticipates the toothpick.

Like many true geniuses (or is that genius?), Marty developed the concept leaning his elbow against a plank of dark polished wood, while propping his head up with his hand.

"OK, I'm a salesman, and I spend a lot of time in bars," Marty said. "But I'm a rum and soda guy."

"My client comes in, orders a martini with blue cheese olives. We start talking."

"That's when I see what the cocktail waitress is doing with his olives. She's a

nice woman, but a little sloppy, and she wasn't the kind of person you'd like stuffing your olive."

Why?

"Well, she had these long red fingernails, really long ones," Marty said.

Go on, I said, terrified.

"I hate to tell you this, but she's stuffing the blue cheese in the olives with her fingernails."

Which one?

"The pinky."

No.

"Yes! The pinky. She used her pinky fingernail."

We didn't speak for a while, driven mute by the evil specter of the red pinky nails.

Yet out of that horror, the Olive Express was born.

"Well, my brother Ken was a tool-and-die maker," Marty said. "And I said, 'Ken, we've got work to do.'"

For an independent test drive, we took an Olive Express to Blackie's, a nice bar and grill near Tribune Tower.

We handed it to the bartender, the professionally skeptical Phill Surowiak, who sneered at first because, as a bartender, he's heard too much.

Then he tried it. It worked perfectly every time and stuffed olives in seconds.

"Look at this! This is great!" said Surowiak, stuffing olives like a grinning maniac, unable to stop. "If I can do it, anybody can do it."

The owner, Gus Maskaleris, tried it. As did Mrs. Flynn, the former June Bride who helps me with the column. Like Phill, she became a compulsive olive stuffer.

So we sat there stuffing olives, happily taking turns, telling stories. Gus and Phill promised to put the Olive Express in a place of honor at the bar, so others may see the wonder of Marty Marcuccilli's mind.

"I think he is a genius," said Phill.

Too bad the MacArthur Foundation didn't think so.

John Kass' column appears on Page 2 on Sunday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.