

Tribes

An occasional look at groups of people within the Eastern Suburbs
THIS WEEK: **HAM RADIO ENTHUSIASTS**

Lo-fi adventurers

Jennifer Bennett

ONCE upon a time, it would have been tempting to start this story with a joke about people who spend too much time inside, tinkering with computers.

It's now pretty clear, however, that the geeks have inherited the Earth, and that youngsters like Daniel Rosenstein will probably be multi-billionaires in about 20 years.

While other 10-year-olds spend their free time on computer games and scooters, Daniel has just got his entry-level ham radio licence. A few weeks ago he spoke to astronauts orbiting the planet on the International Space Station, and now hopes to make new friends around the world.

Daniel was encouraged to get his licence by the other members of the Waverley Amateur Radio Society, which operates out of Rose Bay. He started going to meetings with his father, Mark, a long-time enthusiast.

"My father encouraged me because it looks very cool and some of my friends at the radio club were asking me to get a licence so we could speak on the radio," Daniel said. "It's just the thought of talking around the world and talking to new people."

While "ham" was originally a derogatory term for operators on telegraph lines in the 1920s, these days it refers to a group of hobbyists with serious technological skills.

Hams build their own antennae, put together radio systems, and chat to other hams, be they in the next room



Raffy Shammay of the Waverley Amateur Radio Society (and you didn't think there was one, did you?).

or on the other side of the planet.

"On the surface it's talking by radio to other radio amateurs around the world, with nothing intervening between you and them except the atmosphere," the society's treasurer, Raffy Shammay, said. "But there's a lot of technical experimentation: seeing what works and what doesn't. When the propagation is favourable, that's a whole art in itself – that's nature helping you along to communicate between here and Russia on half a watt of energy with no wires."

The club's members come from all walks of life and include vets, doctors, accountants, artists, actors and, unsurprisingly, computer geeks.

"My wife and one of my sons are hams," Mr Shammay said.

Travelling with a radio is excellent; you always have instant friends – Raffy Shammay

"We have an awful lot of fun."

The club is now celebrating its 90th anniversary, and recently got permission from NASA to make contact with the International Space Station. A 10-minute window of talk-time was available while the station passed 400km overhead, so the club drew lots to see who would get to talk. Daniel was among the winners.

"I asked a question about, 'Was space different to what you expected'. [The



A 'DAD AND SON' THING TO DO: Daniel and Mark Rosenstein.

Photos: TIM CLAPIN

astronaut] said, 'No, not really. For my whole life I just looked up at the sky and wanted to go into space,'" Daniel said.

The group got about five questions in, "and then they started disappearing over the horizon," said Mr Shammay. "We were on a high for a week."

Mr Shammay discovered ham radio as a student at the University of NSW, where a friend showed him a radio antenna he'd set up on top of the electrical engineering building. Since then he's met people around the world and off (the recent contact with the Space Station was his third) and he said the hobby had led to some amazing experiences.

"My best experience was going down a funicula in Norway, putting out a radio call and getting an imme-

mediate call back from three Norwegians offering to take me to lunch," he said. "Travelling with a radio is excellent; you always have instant friends."

For Mark and Daniel Rosenstein, it's a father-son experience like no other. "I think together we might do some projects, like we might build antennas," Mark said. "We strung a piece of wire between two buildings and immediately spoke to Japan."

And does the rest of the family get into it? "No. My daughter prefers horses, dancing and singing," Mr Rosenstein said.

Anyone interested in joining the Waverley Amateur Radio Society should visit the club website www.vk2bv.org, for more details.