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Sleeping In

by David Goldenberg on May 31 at 10:04 AM

Gelf catches up with Randy Gardner, the man who has owned the world record for sleep deprivation since staying up for 11 days straight in 1965.

Randy Gardner lives a quiet life in San Diego with his wife Nona and their cat. Gardner, 60, quit the interior landscaping business 10 years ago, and nowadays his peaceful retirement is only broken up once every few months or so—when a Japanese film crew comes to town.

"The Japanese just love me," Gardner says. "I'm a big hit with the kids' science shows." The reason for the outsize Far East attention: Gardner holds the world record for sleep-deprivation. In 1965, as a high-school student, he went 265 hours without so much as a nap. In the past 41 years, no one has equaled his mark.



Courtesy Randy Gardner
Randy Gardner at home with his cat,
Gorgeous George

Gardner's stunt started out as an academic experiment. "I was a science-fair geek in those days," he says. "My dad was in the Army and we traveled all over the place and I never failed to win first prize. When he got transferred to San Diego, I thought, 'I'm going to have to come up with one hell of a winner to pull this off in a city this size.' "

So Gardner decided to try to break the world record for sleep-deprivation of 201 hours, which had been set in 1959 by New York disc jockey Peter Tripp ([Wikipedia](#)). With help from his friends Bruce McAllister and Joe Marciano, Jr., and Stanford sleep researcher William Dement (who came down to San Diego to study Gardner's mental function a week into the stunt), Gardner made it through a series of hallucinations and rough nights—and gave a surprisingly lucid press conference—before passing out.

"That was a bitch," Gardner tells Gelf of his 11 days of sleeplessness. "The only reason I got through it was because

I was a kid. We got halfway through the damn thing and I thought 'Holy shit, this is tough. I don't want to do this anymore.' But everybody was looking at me at that point so I couldn't quit."

While Tripp used drugs to keep himself awake during his stunt—part of which took place in a glass box in Time Square—Gardner says he didn't even drink coffee. "It's mind over matter," Gardner says. "Your body will shut down. If you don't override it with your mind, you're fucked. You're going to sleep. You're gone." So he kept his juices flowing by playing game after game of basketball with his friends and Dement. He also performed several cognitive studies during the sleepless period that were

the basis of a winning science-fair project.

Gardner still regularly talks to Dement, who is considered the pioneer of sleep research and at 78 still helps to run a [sleep study center](#) he founded at Stanford Medical School. In fact, Dement is the one who often puts reporters and TV crews in contact with Gardner.

While that has led to the occasional American television appearance (Gardner appeared on an episode of *Inside Edition* several years ago) and magazine article (he wrote a small [piece](#) for *Esquire* two years ago about his feat), Gardner has been surprised at the lack of interest that Americans seem to have in his achievement. "It's funny because people outside this country are very interested in this kind of stuff but in this country, nada. Nothing. Zippo," he says. "Basically, nobody seems to be interested. It's weird."

"Maybe because I didn't kill anybody while I was doing it," he says. "Or beat somebody up or drive a car through a building." It may be that, while impressive, the feat doesn't lend itself to sound bites. "It's hard to carry on a decent interview because there's really nothing to say," he says. "Except to say that it was very, very hard."

Gardner is also a bit surprised that no one has yet broken his record. Despite the increase in research about sleep deprivation, there have been few serious attempts to keep people up for such incredible lengths of time. "I think a lot of it is nobody knows that that kind of a thing went down," he says.

That almost changed two years ago, when Gardner says magician and relentless self-promoter David Blaine considered attempting to break the record. "We thought it was a done deal," Gardner says. "He was going to do it in Vegas. I was going to go up and be part of it—not stay awake—but just be part of his deal."

"But staying awake is not real exciting for people to watch," Gardner adds. "I think that's why he let that go. So instead, I guess he got into that underwater thing."

Just because Blaine opted out doesn't mean the record is safe, though. Gardner says he was recently contacted by someone from a South Carolina television station who told him that a group of people there will try to best his record later this year.

Even if his record falls, though, Gardner won't lose any sleep over it. In fact, he hasn't pulled an all-nighter since breaking the record, he says, and generally gets about seven hours of sleep a night. Instead, Gardner goes back to his quiet, mostly anonymous life, interrupted only by the occasional foreign film crew.

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