

Calendar

Crackers Versus Hackers

Computer Crimes You Don't Know About

How people usually put it is, you know, like, the locksmith?" says David Hulton in explaining how anti-hackers are of necessity hackers themselves. "The locksmith knows everything about how locks work, but there's this code of ethics, where you don't use your knowledge to break into people's houses.

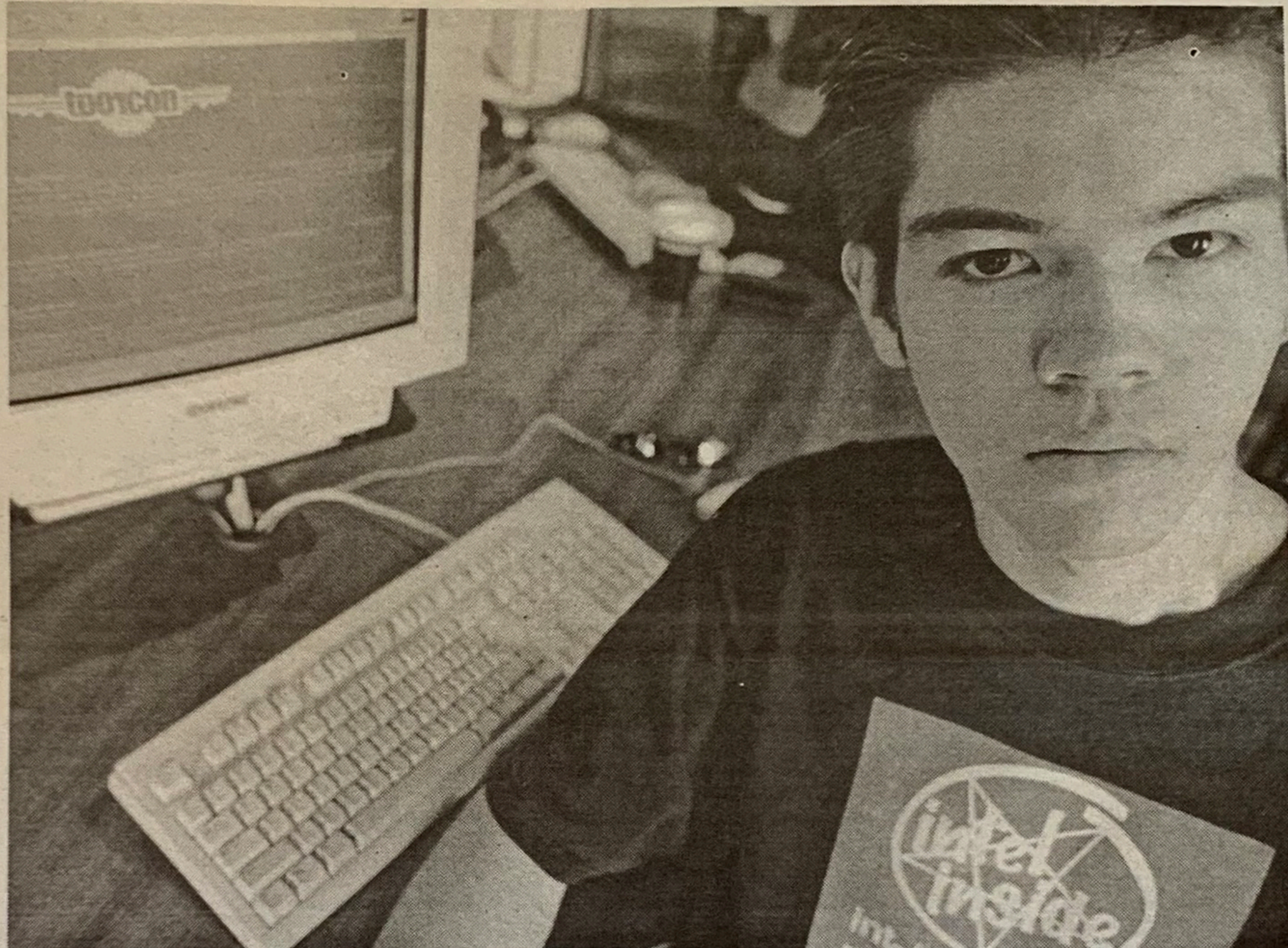
"Some people think all hackers are malicious," says Hulton, whose Nightfall Security Group is a computer-security consulting firm based in San Diego. "In actuality some

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are beneficial to the community. They write programs that help secure systems and inform the public of security vulnerabilities. For example, you may have heard of the L0pht? L0pht Heavy Industries is a noted computer-security firm based in Boston. "They've given talks to Congress. I guess Congress asked how long they would need to take down the Internet. They said, 'About 30 minutes.' The head of it has written a ton of really robust programs."

Hulton believes computer crimes are more numerous than the public realizes. "Like on Attrition last year?" Attrition — www.attrition.org — is "mainly known for its huge mirror of hacked websites," Hulton says. "If a website gets hacked, people usually notify Attrition, and it grabs a copy of the page while it's hacked and posts it. They keep a record of everything. Last year they got over 3000 hacked websites mirrored on their page. And that's only reported ones. I'm sure plenty more people don't want others to know somebody broke into their system."

It's thanks to Hulton that representatives of Attrition and several other computer-security firms will be in San Diego for this weekend's



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

David Hulton

ToorCon Computer Security Expo 2000, which Hulton cofounded and currently chairs. There will be booths and speakers, as at any trade show. There will also be a chance to play RootWars, a computer game cooriginated by Hulton.

"Root" means full administrative privileges on the system, so if you gain root, you have full access." Root is the goal for those who compete as intruders in RootWars. Others, called servers, run the systems the intruders attempt to invade. A third group plays as investigators. They watch the networks, run their intrusion detectors, and hope to catch the highest number of intrusion attempts.

"At DEF CON in Las Vegas — that's the largest hacker convention in the country — a similar game is played," says Hulton. A hacker named, lower-cased, "palante," who will speak at ToorCon, has won DEF CON's server award for the past three years.

Mike Hudack is

another scheduled speaker. "When he was 15, the National Security Agency attempted to recruit him," Hulton says (and Hudack later confirms it). "He had a website they would visit every couple days. He's working for a security think-tank [the Knowledge Propulsion Laboratory] in Connecticut now." Hudack's present age? "I think he's 17." College for him is on hold, presumably? "Yeah." (Laughs.) "He kind of graduated early from high school, too."

And Hulton's age? "I'm 17, almost 18 — next year." And did he graduate high school, himself? "Yeah, there's a test, the California High School Proficiency Examination, and me and my friend took it on the same day last November and got out of high school that way."

The friend, Ben Greenberg, is Hulton's partner in the Nightfall Security Group. He is also the other originator of RootWars and ToorCon's former chair. But he's leaving the country shortly after Labor Day. "He's going to Israel to become a rabbi."

Ron Gula, at age 31, is a veritable oldster in the ToorCon speaker lineup. A communications systems engineer

trained by the Air Force, he, along with his wife, cofounded Network Security Wizards of Columbia, Maryland.

"I'm trying ToorCon for the first time," Gula says. "I'm curious to see who'll be there. I've done DEF CON, and even though that's a hacker conference, I'd say 50 to 75 percent of the attendees, if not more, have high-paying commercial jobs." He says ToorCon is "definitely" billing itself as a hacker conference, too.

"Yeah, set a thief to catch a thief," Gula concedes. "One of the main things Security Wizards does is reverse engineering of the hacker technique." Beyond that, he hesitates to differentiate between good and bad hackers. "I personally don't like to classify people. Traditionally white-hat hackers are the good kind and black-hat hackers are bad." Lately, however, he has heard the term "gray-hat hacker." He has also heard people allude to black-hat hackers "without really saying they're bad." They just mean "very talented," Gula claims. "Someone will say, 'Well, nobody could break into this system except maybe a black-hat hacker.'

"But that's just lingo. None of it is

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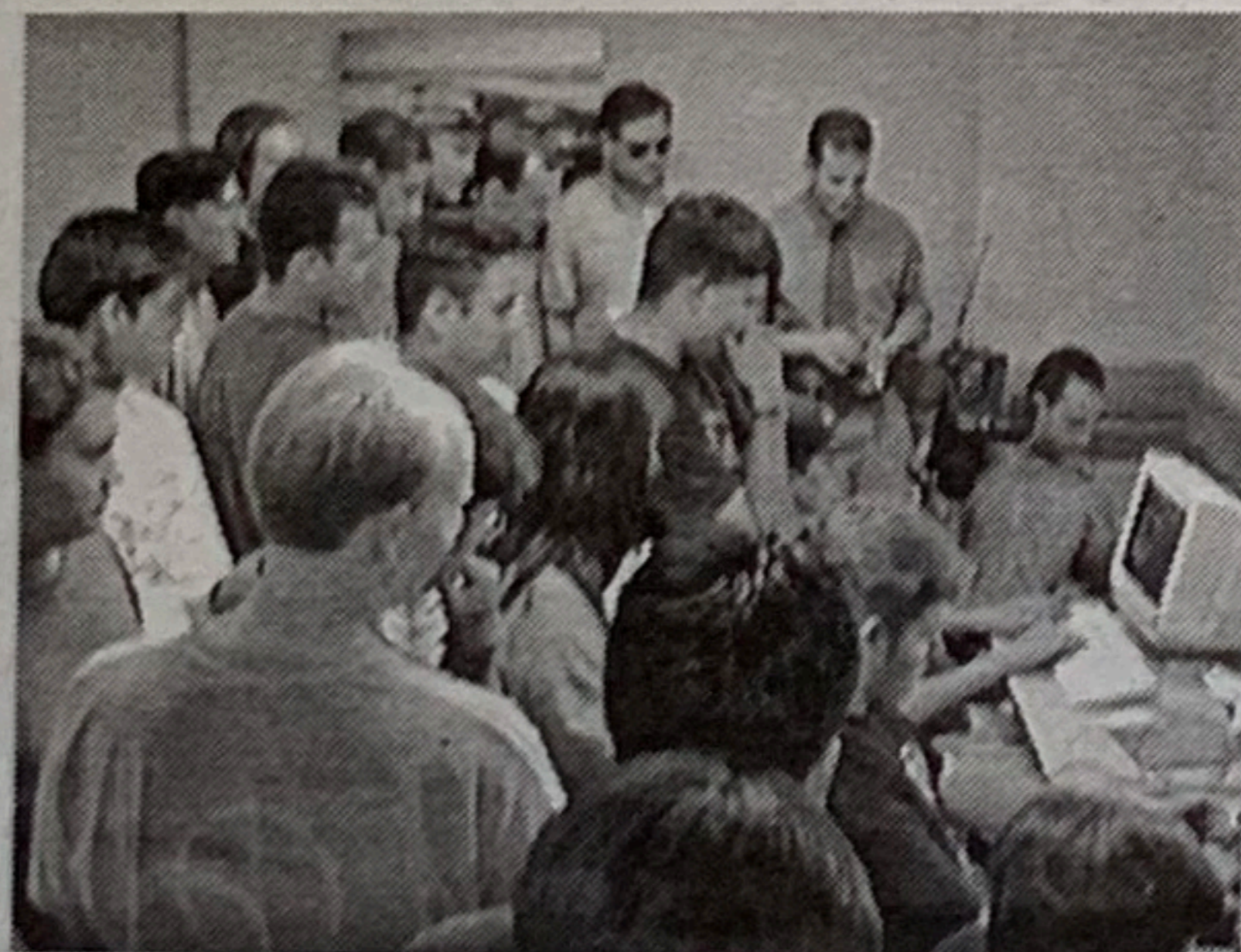
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Attendees of last year's convention