

19 Yrs. in Willowbrook — & He's Not Retarded

By MICHAEL DALY

He may be the only person in the city of New York who looks forward to paying rent.

His name is Anton Zettler, and, next week he will move into an apartment in Chelsea and spend his first night outside an institution since he was 2 years old.

For all but eight of his 27 years, Anton lived inside the chain-link fence that surrounds Willowbrook Developmental Center, a state institution for the retarded in Staten Island. Anton can tell you more about Willowbrook than most of the 5,479 people who were incarcerated there with him. Contradicting the Bureau of Child Welfare doctor who placed him there, the tests Anton took after 19 years in Willowbrook show that he is not retarded.

A Night Stick for an Answer

A foster child, Anton was placed in Willowbrook when he was 2. From the first, he said, he was beaten with nightsticks whenever he spoke without being spoken to. When he was 14, he said, a doctor threw him out a second-story window. When Anton subsequently tried to escape, his clothes were taken from him and he was confined to his dormitory for two weeks.

Although the state allocated \$35,000 per patient per year, most of the people in Anton's dormitory went without essential clothing. At night, Anton had to sleep with his shoes under his pillow. Otherwise, a child who did not have shoes would steal Anton's. As he lay in the dark, Anton would listen to the staff

laugh as the older boys forced the younger boys to submit to homosexual sex.

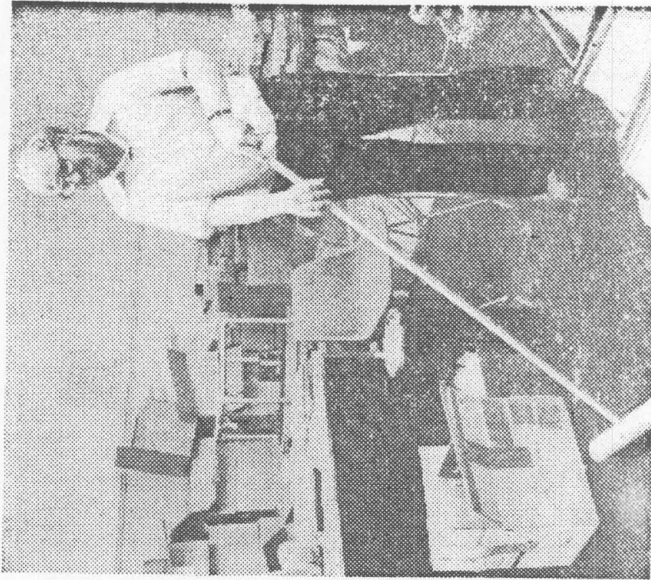
"The beatings, the faggot stuff, it was jail," Anton remembers. "And I was a jailbird. I didn't know if they would ever let me out. But I kept saying to myself, 'Someday I'll get out of here, someday.'"

A few weeks after his 22d birthday, Anton was transferred to the Queens Developmental Center, a new facility for the retarded in Flushing. The Court of Appeals had ordered the state to prepare functional inmates like Anton for release.

Finally Taught to Read

At the Queens center, Anton was taught how to read street signs and use money. He learned what stores are, how to take a bus, and how to use a telephone. For the first time in his life, Anton slept in a room with just one other person. For the first time, he had a door and a window he could open and close. He was finally able to choose what he wanted to wear and what he wanted to eat. He could now speak without fearing that an orderly would whack him across the face with a nightstick. Unlike many other patients, his face was not permanently disfigured.

Last week, Anton signed a lease for a studio apartment on W. 28th St. This marked the end of 25 years of confinement, harder time than most convicts do for murder. And, according to Willowbrook records, Anton's only crime was his "inability at 2 years old to dress and feed himself."



News photo by Robert Rosamilio
Anton Zettler, who will finally find a haven in Chelsea.