

He's seen the world — inside and out

By STEVE CROSS

What happens when you're diagnosed as slightly retarded, spend 24 years in institutions for the mentally retarded and escape from the Willowbrook Developmental Center one day to prove you're not so different from everyone else?



If you're Arthur Dehler, you get a job washing dishes or cleaning buildings, save \$4,000 from your labors and then join a tour group for a trip around the world.

Then you go back to Willowbrook an employee, not a patient, and prove that the mildly retarded can coexist side-by-side with other residents of a thriving community.

Arthur Dehler is 45 years old now, a middle-aged man who minds his business and performs his job as custodian of Building 4 at the Staten Island Developmental Center with pride. He looks back without bitterness on the wasted years before he fled the center.

"I think of my future. I don't think back," he said. "It was probably an honest mistake. I don't blame anybody about it, really."

Dehler's new life began on a Sun-

day in 1960, a day he will always remember.

"It was Dec. 11, and I had only \$12 with me," he began. "They thought I was going to work that morning. I worked in kitchen 18."

Because kitchen work can get rather sloppy, he wore a white institutional shirt and pants to protect his clothing.

"After I walked into the old catwalk, when they still had them here, I took off the coveralls and gave them to my friends, who brought them back to my room."

Dehler then casually waited for a bus to the Staten Island ferry, which took him to Manhattan. He took a subway to the Port Authority bus terminal, and boarded a bus bound for Englewood, N.J., and the home of friends, who set him up as a dishwasher in the hospital where they worked.

For the first time in his life, Dehler was a free man.

"I wanted to show people what I could do, that I could earn my own living," he explained.

One month later, he notified Willowbrook officials he was alive and well and living in New Jersey. He was officially discharged.

"They just congratulated me," he said. "They were glad to know I got a job."

Dehler began his life in institutions when he was 4 years old. He doesn't remember his mother, and doesn't know

his father.

In 1937, he was placed in the upstate Rome Developmental Center, where he spent the years most adults remember as fun and carefree and without responsibility — other than homework.

For Dehler, they were years spent with the severely retarded. He sought out and found others like himself who could speak and communicate, but he knew he was different.

When he turned 19, he was transferred to Willowbrook State School, at the time a monolithic holding pen for the retarded.

It was pretty much the same, living on a ward with the severely retarded who at times writhed on the floor, wrung their hands in meaningless movements or simply sat and stared.

"In 1953, I asked the doctor if they had parole here," he said. "He told me, 'Get out of here. I don't believe in parole.'"

He was accused the same year of stealing a wallet. Being an honest man, yet unable to defend himself in the eyes of the administrators and staff, he boarded the No. 4 bus that began his trip to New Jersey.

"My friends gave me a job two days later in Englewood Hospital as a dishwasher. I got \$40 every two weeks," he said.

The pay improved in 1965 when, after almost four years with a clothing store in Dongan Hills, he landed a job at \$38 a week with a Concord restaurant.

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Last year, Dehler took all the money he had saved during the last five years and spent \$4,000 for a trip around the world.

He visited Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia, and has photo albums of himself and "the natives" to prove it.

He liked Hawaii so much that he plans to retire there in, say, another 20 years.

Now, every day at 3:15 p.m., Dehler walks to Building 4 and begins working to keep it clean.

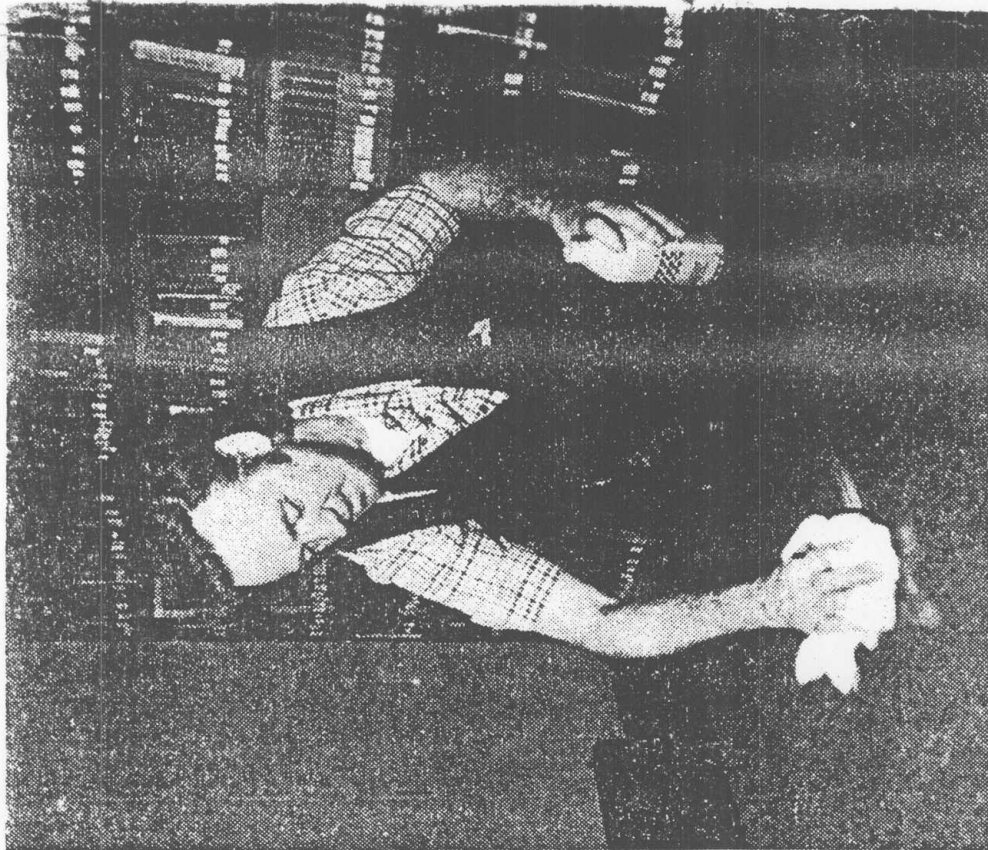
He shines. He scrubs. He mops the floors. And he walks tall and proud through the corridors with building keys dangling at his side.

"I'm happy the way I am," said Dehler, a big smile crossing his face as he polished a table in the library. "I like the shift. There are no hounds on my back, and I get my work done good."

"After 4:30, I've got the building to myself. I'm the cleaner over there, and am responsible for keeping the building locked up, clean and supplied."

Ron Byrne, an employee at the center and friend of Dehler's, adds that there's a bigger lesson in Dehler's story than just a wrong made right after too many years. Had there been community placements in Arthur Dehler's day, rather than the practice of shipping off residents to places like Willowbrook, there would be more people like Dehler functioning in society.

"In 1960, we were the state of the art," Byrne said. "When Arthur came



Arthur Dehler puts the shine to a table in the Building 4 library at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

in, it was really the only option. But it makes no sense at all for people like Arthur to be institutionalized. You find there are more people like him out there than there are people who are different.

"My feeling is evolution just sort of caught up with the Arthurs of the world.

We finally found out how to help people like him.

"He's living proof of how the retarded can fit into society and lead enjoyable, enriching lives. There's a place in the world for all Arthur Dehlers, and it's their right to have that opportunity."

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A round-trip

Arthur Dehler has been around the world, but is most proud of a Staten Island landmark he's "visited" twice — under quite different circumstances. For his story, see Page 11.

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