

# Doug: 'I hate institutions. They're like a jail'

There is more than a tinge of irony that Doug Desterdick's favorite film is "Birdman of Alcatraz."

The movie classic tells the story of a inmate in one of the country's most notorious prisons and his attempts to deal with his confinement.

Desterdick knows all about confinement. He spent more than 15 years of his life in state institutions for the mentally retarded including a 10-year stint at Staten Island Developmental Center.

And while the 34-year-old Island resident, who is moderately retarded, looks puzzled when asked if Alcatraz reminds him of SIDD, his evaluation of the facility leaves no doubt that Desterdick can identify with his movie hero.

"I hate institutions," Desterdick says. "They're like a jailhouse."

A native of the Bronx, Desterdick entered SIDD -- then

called Willowbrook State School -- in 1963, when he was 12 years old. Although he is relatively high functioning (his IQ is tested at 61; his "social" age is about 15), his mother had trouble dealing with Desterdick's physical handicaps; because of cerebral palsy, Desterdick is confined to a wheelchair, and his speech and motor skills are impaired. The disabilities meant Desterdick needed care his family could not provide and Willowbrook was the alternative.

At that time, Willowbrook was horribly overcrowded and understaffed. Desterdick says he has few positive memories of the facility. It was too crowded, he says. Too dirty. There was too much noise. If a resident had a complaint, "they'd say that you weren't at home, you were at an institution," he recalls.

Desterdick left SIDD in 1973, 18 months after the New York Civil Liberties Union filed its class-action suit. Inspired to action, the state began to relieve the institution overcrowding by moving patients out; Desterdick was part of that exodus and he was transferred to Fineson Developmental Center in Queens

Desterdick stayed at the Queens center until 1980, when he was moved into a group home operated by United Cerebral Palsy of New York State. Two years later, UCP transferred him to a four-bedroom apartment the agency operates in a West Brighton co-op on Clove Road.

Certainly, Desterdick seems to like his latest residence. He says he is happy. He likes the quiet, the privacy of living with only four other residents instead of hundreds. He likes having his own room, with its own television. He likes the friendly, intimate atmosphere. UCP provides the apartment with 24-hour supervision, but the staff and four residents are like family, a far cry from the impersonal relationships found in institutions. Desterdick calls the staff by their first names; they call him "Dougie."

In this setting, Desterdick leads a life remarkable only because it is so "normal." He gets up every morning about 6, eats

*Doug*  
*10/3*