

# 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.

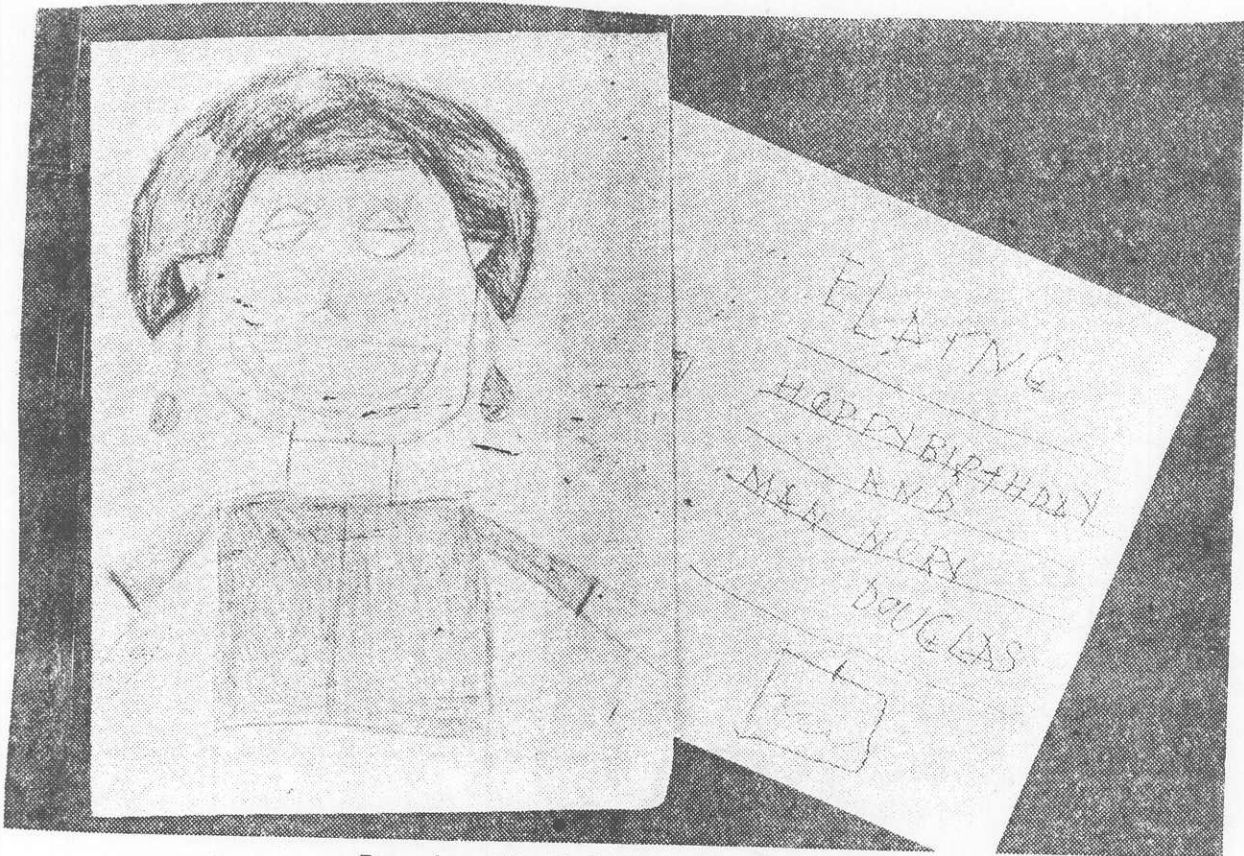
Desterdick left SIDD in 1973, 18 months after the New York Civil Liberties Union filed its class-action suit. Inspired to action, the state began to relieve the institution overcrowding by moving patients out; Desterdick was part of that exodus and he was transferred to Fineson Developmental Center in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

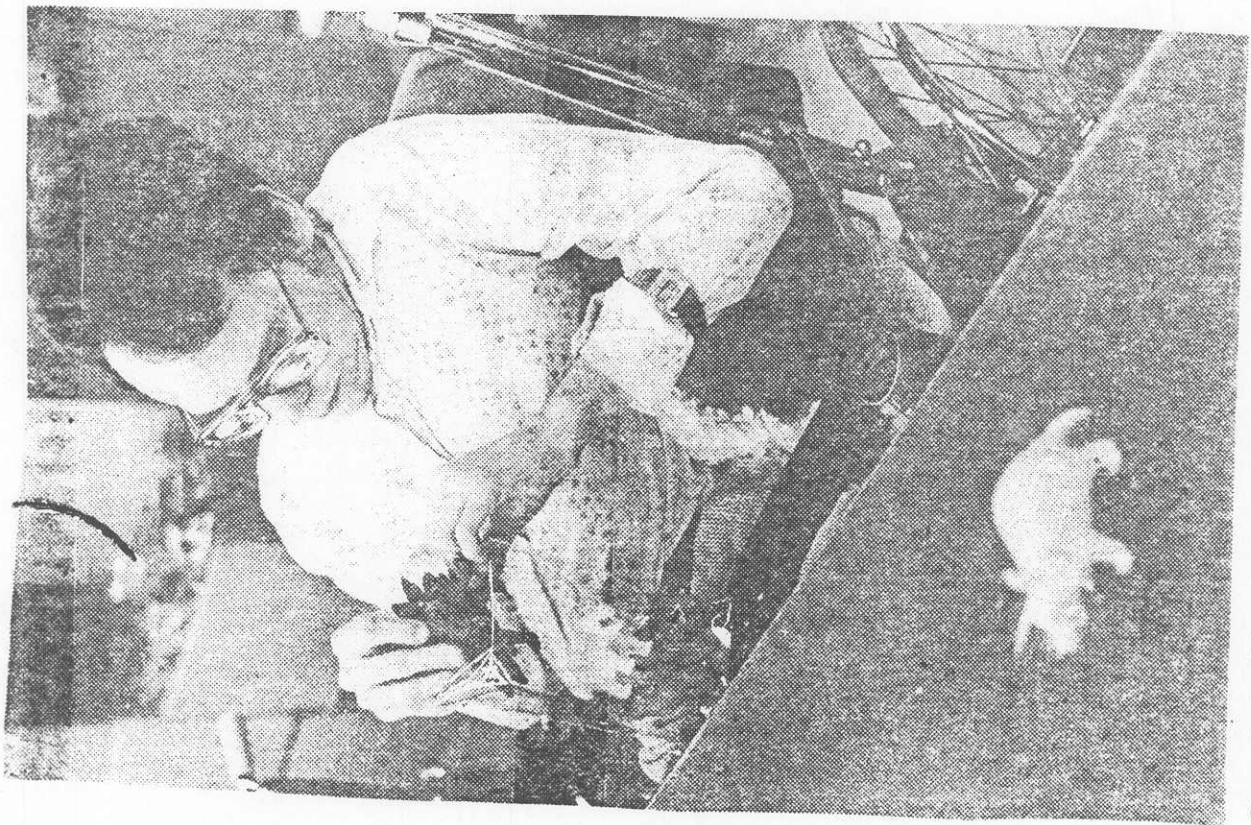
Certainly, Desterdick seems to like his latest residence. He says he is happy. He likes the quiet, the privacy of living with only four other residents instead of hundreds. He likes having his own room, with its own television. He likes the friendly, intimate atmosphere. UCP provides the apartment with 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*  
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Doug drew this birthday card for a friend.



Doug Desterdick works at United Cerebral Palsy's Vocational Rehabilitation Center in New Brighton, where he puts plastic toys into bags.

S.I. Advance Photos by Tony Dugal

Apartment Inc. and the owners of the five apartments — Nathaniel Ratner, Herman Geiser and Stanley Ginsberg — are currently battling the matter in court.

Meanwhile, UCP has filed a complaint with the state Human Rights Division, claiming the eviction is based on discrimination against the handicapped. Keith Penman, regional director of UCP, says other apartments are subject, but the co-op wants to evict only UCP.

The situation infuriates the UCP staff, who maintain that people like Desterdick have as much right as any other Staten Islander to live where he wants. And they say the West Brighton apartment is the best place for him.

"All his needs are met here. It provides him with as much normalization as he can handle," Lopes said. "I wouldn't like to see him go anywhere else."

says with a grin, "Well, you're not my type."

As for Desterdick's future, there some are clouds on the horizon. Desterdick has outgrown his job at the workshop, but more skilled work for someone like Desterdick is not available. Sheltered workshops, which are subsidized by state funds, offer only the kind simplistic tasks Desterdick does now. And while UCP staffers says Desterdick could probably handle competitive employment — such as microfilming — corporations are reluctant to take a chance on someone both physically and mentally handicapped.

Desterdick and his roommates also face a challenge on the homefront. The co-op board at the Fountains, where they are living, wants the UCP clients evicted. UCP sublets five apartments there, and the co-op association maintains that it has the right to reject sublease agreements. Fountain Clove Road

breakfast and goes to work at a supervised workshop in New Brighton operated by UCP of New York City. His job — he puts plastic animals into plastic bags to be sold — can be boring, he says, but he likes earning money. At night, Desterdick likes talking on the phone with friends, visiting with neighbors, watching television. He enjoys games, and can beat the staff at Atari and backgammon. Twice a week, he attends special education classes at College of Staten Island.

He has blossomed in the group home atmosphere, according to the UCP staff. "He's learned to be more independent; he's telling time now, counting money — things that were not taught in the institution," says social worker Frank Lopes. He has also become less reserved, and has even cultivated a gentle wit. When a staffer chides Desterdick for not remembering the staffer's birthday, Desterdick

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