

## He walked to freedom from 25 years of isolation, abuse

BY CARLTON E. SPITZER

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**EASTON** — George Flamer is a gentle soul with soft voice, slight build and a limp from cerebral palsy discovered at birth 51 years ago in Talbot County.

Whisked to a Baltimore facility for the mentally retarded as a toddler, he was cruelly isolated and abused for 25 years, deprived of education and poorly nourished. He often slept on the floor.

As he grew older, he tucked away the few dollars he was paid for performing menial tasks at the institution.

On a bright, sunny morning in 1964, age 28, he walked away, down a hill through unfamiliar neighborhoods, trudging many miles to a bus depot in downtown Baltimore. He unfolded crumpled bills he'd saved to buy a ticket to Talbot County.

His older sister in Easton was shocked when he knocked on her door. She hugged him, standing back to look him over.

"I'm not going back," he said softly.

Authorities came for him. He raised his hand as if giving a pledge, repeating his irrevocable decision: "I will not go back."

Last week, as he proudly walked a visitor through the Chesapeake Center's well-organized and delightfully cool industrial workshop on Dover Street in Easton where he assembles small parts with 100 fellow workers, he lamented that a great many disabled children were hidden away at home or in institutions less than a half-century ago.

They might have made contributions to society if they had been given the opportunity to learn and grow intellectually, he says.

Flamer believes disabilities are turned into handicaps only when society fails to provide people the assistance and opportunity they need. In his day, many people in authority "didn't give a damn" what happened to a disabled person, especially a person of color in a segregated society. Deprived of basic education, many disabled adults of Flamer's era are functionally illiterate, limiting their access to jobs.

"They looked right past us like we didn't exist in those days," he smiles ruefully. "We had talents and skills, too."

When he first returned to the Mid-Shore he worked in a car wash and at whatever task might earn a few dollars. He discovered the Chesapeake Center, and worked there occasionally.

He has been there full-time since 1999. The Center opened a vista he had not imagined existed. "It was like starting life over," he grins.

Today he lives across the street and walks to work, a man without anger or recrimination. As he picks up a piece of finely wound cable in the workshop he smiles broadly, advising his visitor “never to look back because something might catch up with you.”

Flamer was one of the first disabled persons to secure housing on his own in Talbot County, moving from a group home. His apartment on Dover Street is the center of laughter and conversation. Friends respect him as a model of self-advocacy for persons with all types of disabilities because he encourages the downtrodden and inspires action.

He was elected a director of the disAbility Coalition of Talbot County in June, and by appointment of the governor has served on the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council for several years. Sixty percent of council members have a developmental disability.

His friend and aide, Roger Rima, a retired IBM executive, drives Flamer to meetings and assists him in preparing reports and proposals.

“George is a very bright man with wonderful ideas,” Rima says. “I learn from him every day.”

Flamer pioneered formation of People on the Go of Talbot County ten years ago and held offices as the organization grew.

Flamer and Rima are staunch supporters and advocates for the ARC of Maryland. “Those initials stand for the Association for Retarded Children,” Rima explains. “But today the ARC is seen as a bridge connecting developmentally challenged persons with the larger community.”

Stigma has been reduced, but still burdens persons with disabilities, Flamer says. Progress is evident overall in improving the lives of persons with physical, mental and developmental disabilities. But medical specialists are in short supply, he notes, and many disabled persons lack dental care.

Inadequate rural public transportation is a major problem. He admires the Epilepsy Association in Salisbury for providing its members cab fare to visit doctors and dentists, shop for food, and attend church services.

Disabled persons need and deserve assistance, he says. But Flamer teaches the most powerful advocacy comes from within the person.