

Daniel J. Winchester '76,
psychologist:

Dr. Dan, the marathon man

It was raining and still dark at 6 a.m. on Sunday, November 2, when three men, members of the Achilles Track Club, poised at the Staten Island side of the Verrazano Bridge. At the signal, they were off and running in the New York City Marathon, four hours before the official starting time. Forty-one other members of the Achilles Club, which is for disabled runners, would begin the race at 8 a.m., but these three needed an extra head start.

One was Daniel Winchester, wheelchair-bound with severe cerebral palsy, who had begun training in 1985. "When Dan came out, it didn't occur to me that he was interested in competing in races," says Dr. Richard Traum, a marathon runner and partial amputee who founded the club. "When he entered his first race in the spring of 1986, it didn't occur to me that he was thinking of doing a marathon." By the following October, Mr. Winchester had run a 15½-mile race, propelling himself backwards with his legs. He was clearly ready for November.

With one volunteer walking at each side to keep him on the course, "Dr. Dan" crossed the Central Park finish line 10 hours after the predawn start. "Every one was going bananas," he recalls with satisfaction. But one marathon was not enough; Mr. Winchester is already training in Central Park twice a week for his next one later this year. His aim this time, says Dr. Traum, will be not just to complete the course, but to improve his time.

Dan Winchester has always been an achiever. On the wall above his typewriter hang his marathon medal and three diplomas. Besides having been a Dean's List student at Columbia, he has master's and doctoral degrees from Yeshiva University. He sits on the board of directors of several committees for the disabled. He has won many awards. At Yeshiva he maintained a 3.9 grade-point average.

He is as independent as he is determined. When he goes to his Central Park workouts, Mr. Winchester takes two public buses from his apartment near

New York University Medical Center—a frustrating task at times because many buses either lack the wheelchair lift he requires, or because the lifts don't work or drivers won't take him. The one-way trip often takes one hour and 15 minutes, sometimes longer. "I've always had a lot of drive," he explains. Though he credits his parents with giving him the freedom to make his own decisions, "I was the one who set the pace."

Mr. Winchester's Polish-born parents were living in Tel Aviv, Israel, when Daniel, their second son, was born (their older son, Gene, was born in Paris). When Dan was five, the family moved to New York. From kindergarten through junior high school, Mr. Winchester attended special education classes in the New York City public schools. When he was ready for high school, the Board of Education offered him home instruction. "My parents refused and fought the Board tooth and nail," Mr. Winchester says. The Board caved in, and Mr. Winchester and about 10 classmates won admission to Charles Evans Hughes High School in Manhattan.

He applied to Columbia on a dare. Robert Schonhorn, Executive Director of United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, bet Mr. Winchester \$25 that the College would admit him. "I still owe him the money," says Mr. Winchester, who was accepted one week after his interview. He took 12 credits per semester, finishing in five years, and made a few compromises in the course requirements.

"I couldn't take Music Humanities because I'm hearing-impaired," says Mr. Winchester, who wears two hearing aids and is an adept lip reader. "And I didn't take phys. ed. because nobody would have known what to do with me." Students made him carbon copies of their notes while Mr. Winchester, who developed acute memory skills, sat in the front of the classroom. He typed his exams at home and turned them in the next day.

"Dan was one of a kind," recalls former College Dean



Lois Sharr

Peter R. Pouncey, now president of Amherst College. "The day-to-day living to accrue three points of credit was charged with effort and humiliation," yet he showed "courage, cheerfulness and perseverance."

Though he was rejected by every clinical psychology program he applied to, Mr. Winchester was offered a slot in Yeshiva's Ph.D. program in developmental psychology. He obtained his degree in 1985. His thesis explored neurophysiological approaches to the treatment of cerebral palsy.

Both in school and since, Mr. Winchester has had many research, consulting and counseling jobs, some paid, some volunteer, but he found that he loves teaching most of all. During the summers of 1985 and 1986, and last fall, he was a teaching assistant at Teachers College. He believes, however, that many employers hesitate to hire him. "There are quite a few people with a mind-set about what I can or can't do," he says, "and sometimes I get sick and tired of it all. I have to keep proving that I can do the work." This often means initiating his own projects, and he recently submitted a grant proposal for \$850,000 to study the interaction between cerebral-palsied infants and their mothers.

Mr. Winchester's daily life

proves how much a disabled person can do on his own, given the opportunity and the pluck, and the welcome support of New York State's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. For seven years he has had an apartment in a building for people with special physical needs, which enables him to be largely self-sufficient. Ramps, automatic doors, pedal-controlled bathroom fixtures and other accommodations make life easier. He does need help with dressing, meal preparation, housekeeping and major errands, so for these chores he has a home attendant.

Despite the things that set Mr. Winchester apart from his peers, he shares many of their goals, including wanting a secure career and his own family. With the Ph.D. done, he is well on the road to the former; establishing a relationship presents greater hurdles. Most able-bodied women are not interested in dating him, and, he says, "There are few disabled women with the same perspective I have, though that's changing with the Achilles connection."

All the same, Dan Winchester says, "I'm optimistic, but with a grain of salt. I want to be a role model and show what it's possible for a disabled person to do."

Myra Alpersen