

# Interview:

## John Maher &

## Mimi Silbert



**NOTE:** You fly to Albuquerque, then drive two hours north, just past tiny Espanola with its two shopping centers, one Have-a-Burger, and one SonicBurger, and you have entered northern New Mexico, a harsh and beautiful backland of dirt roads leading in all directions to the adobe dwellings of the poor.

You turn into the vast San Juan pueblo straddling the Rio Grande, and wind over a dusty road for five minutes until coming to a high adobe wall, fortress-like, with an arching gate. Driving inside the walls brings you into Delancey Street.

The well-known San Francisco operations of the Delancey Street Foundation have spread out to the poor and oppressed of this historic center of the Southwest. Delancey Street is a way station towards self-respect and sanity for the modern "immigrants" from prison, from drug addiction, and from wasted lives. Through work programs, small businesses, service activities and internal therapy, the men and women of Delancey Street have become a powerful symbol of redemption and a major force in progressive causes throughout California.

Formerly a rich man's dude ranch, the walled-in Delancey Street center in New Mexico is thriving with the kind of spirit and activity that comes with building something new. The weather is cold, life is hard, supplies are few and distant, and yet the hardship is turned into a positive experience. As a new kind of "outlaw of the Wild West", the Delancey Street members are sweeping brush, cutting dead trees, filling ponds, plastering walls, repairing wires, and staying up late into the night in encounter sessions or simply for chess and coffee.

About 25 people have come from San Francisco to begin. They expect to have 40 to 50 more from the New Mexico prison system by February, and hope to reach more than 100 as the center's capacity increases. Meanwhile, the San Francisco operation continues as the Foundation's central base. The vision of the leadership includes continued expansion, perhaps next into southern California, and continued commitment to the cause of the poor.

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Not recognizing boundaries has been the style of Delancey Street founder John Maher and co-president Mimi Silbert, and carrying the message to the Southwest is no exception. Several CED representatives, including Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, spent the holiday season at Delancey Street, New Mexico, to understand this new phase of Delancey's growth.

We interviewed John and Mimi on Christmas Eve.

**CED:** How did all this start?

**MS:** *I had a contract with the Governor's Council on Criminal Justice to write the Master Plan for criminal justice in New Mexico. One of the big issues as we talked to the Governor, the legislators and the people in criminal justice was that they are so far behind all the other states.*

*They have only one penitentiary in the entire state, and everyone is crammed into it. They initially wanted us to help design new, modern prisons to catch up. I kept insisting that this was their opportunity to skip over all the years of mistakes that everyone else had made, to build no more prisons and instead set up alternative systems.*

**CED:** What have you encountered here, and what do you hope to build on it?

**JM:** *The apparent ugliness of this valley, which takes away from the grandeur of the scenery, is imposed by beating people into total moroseness. A lot of the reason for the trash dumped on the fields, the horror, is the moroseness of their lives.*

*But it could be like Palestine was supposed to be. The concept of large numbers of people inhabiting a barren, unused, empty land and restoring it so they can build lifestyles applicable to their needs. A kind of liberated zone. That's what we want to do, and are gonna do.*