

JOHN MAHER AND MIMI SILBERT AMONG THE EX-CONS AT THEIR REHAB CENTER

San Francisco's Delancey Street rehabilitation program is designed to bring drug addicts, ex-cons and former prostitutes back into society. It is not the sort of place where two people—especially two such profoundly mismatched people as the Delancey Street Foundation co-presidents, John Maher and Mimi Silbert—would be likely to meet and fall in love.

But Maher, 37, a Bronx grade school dropout and ex-junkie, and Silbert, 35, a Boston intellectual with doctorates in criminology and psychology, now talk about their meeting seven years ago in terms of "being hit by a thunderbolt" (he) and "electrical flashes" (she). As a couple, they have turned their project into one of the country's most successful residential treatment centers.

"They're the perfect yin and yang combination," says admirer Jane Fonda, who with husband Tom Hayden often visits Delancey Street. "He's the brilliant, canny public face. She's the private, nurturing mother spirit. Personally, I'd go to the wall with them."

That kind of commitment is also demanded of the 350 Delancey Street residents—who live at four locations

and work in eight businesses, including a restaurant and a furniture factory. Maher calls his charges "a bunch of junkies helping each other."

The son of Irish parents in the South Bronx, Maher was hooked on heroin by the age of 12. In the early grades he ran numbers and at 13 was sent to reform school—the first of seven jail terms. Finally, at 22, facing yet another sentence, Maher was given a choice: prison or Synanon, Charles Dederich's pioneering rehabilitation center in Santa Monica, Calif. Maher headed west.

Silbert, meanwhile, was growing up in an immigrant family where her parents "made me feel I was the most important person in their lives." She was a top scholar, student council president, cheerleader and voted "nicest girl." Her addiction was books.

At 21, she wrote a philosophy paper at the University of Massachusetts that won her a trip to study with Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris. Then she moved on to Cal-Berkeley, where she earned her two doctorates under sociologist Lewis Yablonsky. After that she taught at Berkeley and, despite sexist opposition, became a training consultant to police departments from Boston to San Diego (although she is tiny physically—4'11", 85 pounds). In addition, she married an attorney

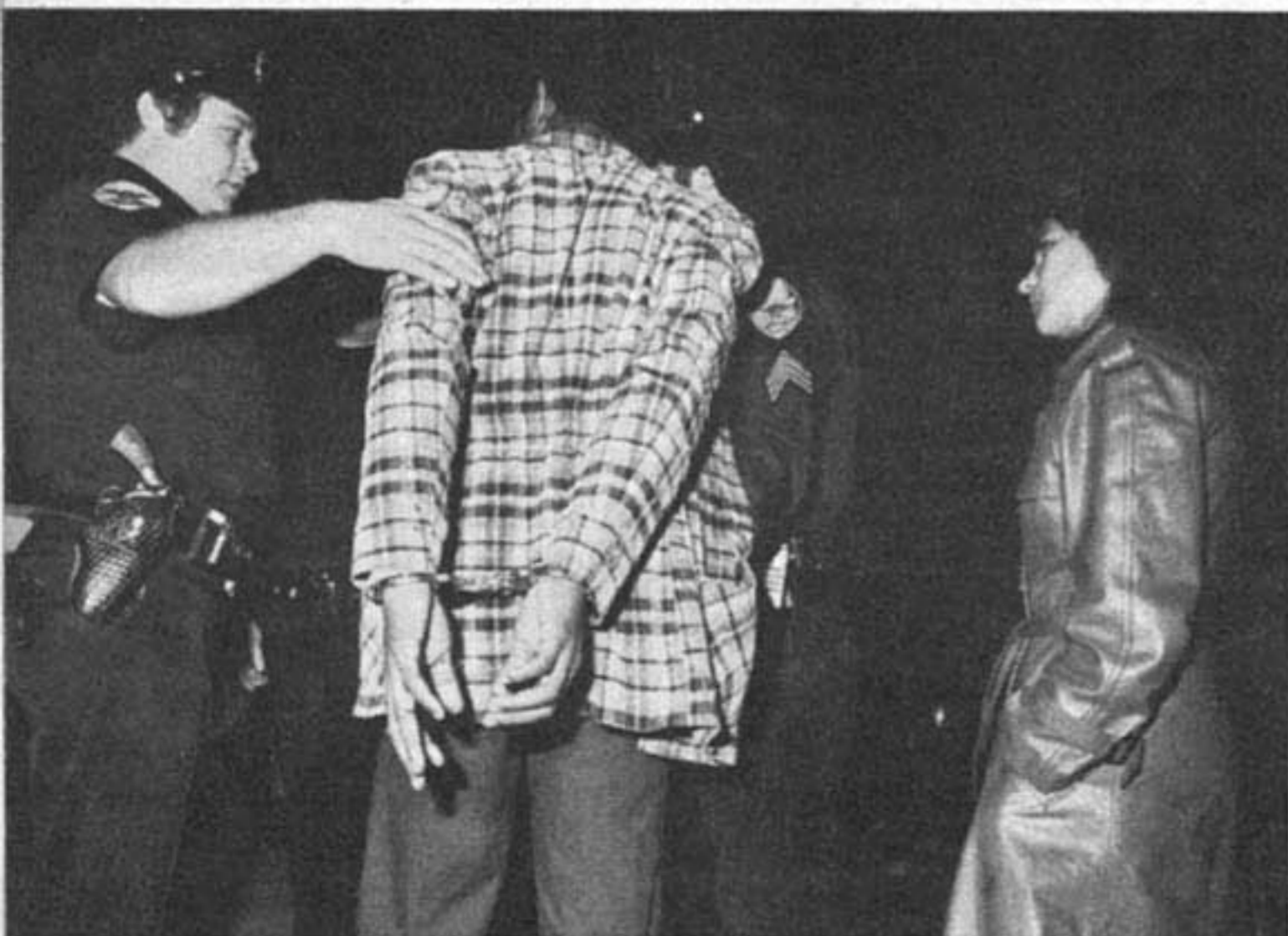
in 1965 and gave birth to twin sons three years later.

Meanwhile Maher cured himself of drug addiction at Synanon ("The change of scenery itself started my climb out of the gutter"). In nine years his prodigious energy and quick rap took him to the top of that famed community's hierarchy. But in 1971 he left Synanon, inspired to start his own program (named after a New York street where Irish-American immigrants once lived). His resources were modest: a grubby San Francisco apartment, three disciples and \$100 from a loan shark.

Delancey Street's philosophy is self-rescue, self-help, self-reliance. Its newcomers, called "immigrants," are not allowed visits, phone calls or passes for six months. They have no rights until they've shown they can handle responsibilities—by remaining drug-free, for example. Later they move to job training while participating in compulsory "games," attack-style group therapy sessions intended to teach nonviolent means of coping with frustration. Maher says most residents should leave after two years, maximum, if they are rehabilitated.

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Mimi Silbert, who helps train San Francisco police, observes a robbery arrest while accompanying a night patrol.



John Maher meets with the senior staff of his Delancey Street Foundation. They are all current foundation residents.



Photographs by Michael Alexander



Maher and Silbert and her twins, David (front) and Gregory, check out a 1940 Buick. Delancey residents refurbish old cars as therapy and vocational training.

Couples CONTINUED

Delancey Street was a year old and already showing encouraging results when Mimi was asked to help raise funds. Neither the project nor Maher has been the same since. "She was a lady of quality like none I'd ever met," Maher says. "She was cute and sparkling but also brilliant and compassionate. I made up my mind—I'm going to have that woman."

A year passed, Silbert adds, before their relationship was anything more than professional. "It was pure tor-

ture," she recalls. "It was the first time John had really fallen in love. And I had been content with my marriage. We agreed not to get involved personally until we were absolutely sure."

They were. In 1973 she and the twins moved in with Maher, after a "wedding" in which they exchanged casual vows. (They talk now, with no urgency, of "a proper marriage.")

Silbert refined Delancey Street's methods of treatment, while Maher used the publicity value of his street background to promote the program. Through their combined efforts the project has grown into a \$2 million operation which opened a branch outside Santa Fe recently. Maher doesn't dazzle everyone, however—one critic describes him as "a loud, pompous ass." Others accuse Maher of creating a cult. "People who come here worship antiheroes like motorcycle gang leaders and Charles Manson, for Christ's sake!" he responds. "We give them more positive examples." Of the more than 2,000 people who have been recycled by the program, Maher estimates that about 25 percent slip back into lives of drugs and crime.

Current HQ is the former Soviet consulate in the posh Pacific Heights district. At the four resident centers Silbert and Maher conduct therapy ses-

sions, with mutual affection and respect. ("In private, however, we sometimes disagree," concedes Mimi, "screaming accusations at each other. But we settle quickly and don't hold grudges.") Maher, his machismo gentled, calls Mimi "the Boss," adding, "Every man should live with a woman who's more intelligent than he is."

They live on her income (both of them draw only \$100 a month "walking-around money" from the foundation). At present she is managing all training programs for the San Francisco PD, and she recently evaluated New Mexico's prison system. She is currently doing the same for California.

At home Silbert and Maher are resolutely square. "The middle-class life is the good life," he says. "It's love and family and all the things that make life worth living." The twins, David and Gregory, now 9, "adore John," Mimi says, "because he's such a special character."

Maher, once known as "Whitey the Priest" because he wore a clerical collar to hustle drug money, now is an assistant Cub Scout leader in his spare time.

MELBA BEALS



Jane Fonda, with Maher at the local premiere of *Julia*, is expected to perform at a Delancey Street benefit in April.

The boys' evenings end with board games (no TV weeknights). Mom and Maher often go back to work afterward.

