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# Pat Montandon



## Delancey Street Christmas

Christmas Eve 1981. The russet adobe walls of the large compound where I was spending Christmas in New Mexico were adorned with *luminarios*, small paper sacks weighted with sand, each holding a lighted candle. As I watched the sun set in a rosy glow over the snow-capped Santa Fe mountains, the decorations reflected along the walls and buildings as the familiar strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night" drifted from within. I pulled open a heavy carved oak door and went into a large room with white-washed walls, terra cotta tile floors and a beamed ceiling. In the corner past a small piano was a fireplace with a roaring fire in the grate. Against one wall stood a magnificent and pungent fir tree, its top skimming the ceiling. It was trimmed with twinkling lights and homemade decorations. Beneath its branches was a pile of gifts.

Near the piano was a seated group of young men and women lustily singing Christmas carols. "Come join us," said one sandy-haired man as he pulled up a chair and handed me a copy of sheet music. As I sang I looked at their faces — open, warm, clear-eyed and above all, positive and loving. It was hard to imagine that these people with whom I had elected to spend the holidays were former drug addicts, criminals and prostitutes.

I was staying in the New Mexico Delancey Street house. Delancey Street originated in San Francisco, and has the highest rate of success of any such facility in the country.

The day I arrived, I had breakfast with all 75 of the group. They treated me with great courtesy. After breakfast, as is true every working day, they held a meeting, which is conducted on a rotating basis so that in time each person has to contribute. There were songs, skits and a piano solo by a young woman who had painstakingly learned "Clair de Lune" as a special gift for a friend.

The newest members of the house, ages 8 to 16, sang a Christmas carol. For some it was the first one they had ever sung — they were off key and nervous, but it was the most beautiful carol I have ever heard.

"Some of these are kids who were grossly abused by their parents; they were put on the streets to pimp or be prostitutes," Mimi Silbert, co-president with John Maher of Delancey Street, told me. "One boy was a car thief even

though he was too short to reach the pedals. He took a friend along, and he worked the pedals while the other one steered."

As I got to know people, I found it difficult to believe they had criminal records. They had been the outlaws and outcasts of civilized society.

"What about Irene?" I asked Mimi. "She couldn't have been so tough." Irene was full of life and positive energy. She heads the youth program, has gone to college and is currently working on a law degree. Her warmth and caring showed in everything she did. "When Irene first came into our program she was the most belligerent, foul-mouthed person you could imagine," Mimi said. "She spent the first year of her stay in the dishpan."

At Delancey Street, everyone works. The newest always start in the kitchen, scrubbing floors and pots and pans. They advance into other better areas of work as they prove themselves. It had been a long, hard struggle for Irene, but there she stood wearing a pretty pink wool dress, her face scrubbed clean of makeup and her fair hair curled softly around her face. She had graduated at the top of her class.

Another Delancey Street graduate was there with her family. An attractive woman, slender and chic, she too had worked her way through school. She had always had a dream of being a fashion designer. When the time came, Delancey Street backed her foray into design school. After years of struggle she finally clicked, and her beautiful designs are worn by people who get photographed for "W." Jacqueline Onassis is one of her customers. This successful woman had come to Delancey Street as a prostitute and a robber. She had lost all hope and had planned to skip out as soon as she could make her getaway. But she didn't, and now she's a contributing member of society.

A young man who had helped prepare the delicious Christmas meal is from a well-known Bay Area family. He was strung out on drugs, but kicked his habit and works helping build "The Project," a large structure that will hold supplies.

What makes this program work when so many fail, I wondered. I soon received the answer. Love. Not love alone, but love combined with all the best knowledge from any available source.

On Christmas night Mimi gave a talk as we sat at the candle-lit dining tables. "This is a birthday," she said. "The birthday of Jesus. But it's your birthday, too. You have been reborn, each one of you." She looked around the large room at every face. "I'm proud of you," she said, "and I want you to stand and give yourselves a big round of applause for what you've all accomplished since being in Delancey Street. I know it has sometimes been hard, but you've made it. You can be proud of the new person you have become."

As they stood and clapped, they also hugged one other, and Mimi and me as well. Waves of love engulfed me and I realized I was experiencing the true meaning of Christmas, the best one I have ever had.