By DIANA SPERRAZZA

Delancey Street, in one of the tougher parts of New York City's Lower East Side, has long been a first home for immigrants coming to America. The Jews, the Italians, the Poles, and lately the Puerto Ricans have all done their stints on Delancey Street. It remains a stopover in a new world for people in pursuit of new dreams.

Five years ago, New Mexico became the site of another Delancey Street. But this one isn't just a street. Just outside of Española, this Delancey Street is a rehabilitation program that is giving 90 ex-convicts and drug addicts — some of society's biggest losers — a serious second chance at life.

"We picked the name because the original Delancey Street was a symbol of self-reliance, of people making it in American culture, and that's what we're all about," Dr. Mimi Silbert, Delancey Street's diminutive but dynamic 40-year-old president says. She has a Ph.D. in both criminology and psychology from the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Silbert is drinking coffee and peering out the window, obviously pleased and proud about the community she and a few others scratched out of the rural New Mexican landscape not so long ago. Taking in the view, she sums up Delancey Street's purpose concisely: "We're like a recycling center. We take society's garbage and recycle it into something better."

Rooted comfortably on a 15-acre former dude ranch restored by residents, Delancey Street is heir to a legacy started more than a decade ago in urban San Francisco.

A well-educated Mimi Silbert, got wind of the program and started running encounter groups for them. She never left. "I never felt so needed," she recalls.

Dr. Silbert worked out a highly successful program that is at once street-wise, pragmatic and compassionate. It reteaches virtually every aspect of life to residents — everything from how to set a table to coping with conflicts with peers.

"Basically what we do is completely re-educate people," Silbert says. "These people are not burn-outs. They are highly energized people. what we do is flip the energy: we don't kill it. We turn it into positive energy."

Positive energy is almost a tangible substance at Delancey Street. You get a strong whiff of it just walking through the gate. Faces that bear the ravages of all kinds of abuses reflect it. The adobe and wood buildings are immaculate but cheerfully lived-in. Residents making lunch laugh and chatter while they work. A group of juveniles, a brand-new addition to the program, are in class, discussing a book they're reading — "Manchild in the Promised Land" — author Claude Brown's saga of growing up in Harlem. Hands shoot up, eager to participate in the discussion. Obviously, they relate well to Brown's jarring journey into manhood.

"Before they came, these were some of the meanest kids in New Mexico; now look at them," Dr. Silbert says, sounding like a proud mother.

Dr. Mimi Silbert Gives Freddy a Hug

Photos by Mimi Forsyth

New Mexico has a Delancey Street because of Dr. Silbert's extensive energies. She is no stranger to the state and its corrections system. In the early '70s, under the Apodaca administration, Mimi Silbert was part of a governor's council that drew up a model plan for corrections in the state. New Mexico's corrections situation was the most "desperate and tough" she had ever encountered.

"Frankly, I felt that if we at Delancey Street were what we said we were, we better come down here (from San Francisco) as fast as we could," she says.

"People said, 'You'll never make it in New Mexico — that only fueled my fires,' she says.

Presently, Delancey Street draws its people from a number of sources. They may be ex-convicts, drug addicts, people on parole, or convicted felons serving a sentence at Delancey Street instead of prison. "Technically, we're open to everyone," Dr. Silbert says, then pauses — she doesn't pull any punches. "That is, anyone who can put up with our very structured, very difficult, very disciplined approach," she adds.

For Delancey Street residents, that means getting up at 7 a.m. and putting in eight hours' work, something many have never done before. It means dressing for dinner, endless group meetings that feature Dale Carnegie-like training for improved self-image and success, and total adherence to a strict behavioral code. Residents get a chance to let off steam at two mandatory encounter groups every week, where they can gripe about the program or other residents or get yers of back-loged anger off their chests.

Delancey Street employs no counselors as such. It is a self-help program with those who have completed their official stay, remaining to help others.

No one enters the program without previous screening and a minimum two-year commitment to stay. All drugs, and alcohol use, as well as physical violence, is forbidden.

"We fight for you here, but the second you choose not to do that (follow the rules) we will immediately call the authorities," Silbert says. "We are not anti-law enforcement."
Delancy Gives Losers 2nd Chance

"Nothing's going to stop me," said Delancy Street resident, 25-year-old Mary Carvalho.

Delancy Street loses about one-quarter of all those who enter the program each month. When months are especially difficult, the staff sees many residents leave. In Delancy Street, the most common, "I was surprised," she said. "I thought I'd be in here for a few weeks, but I've been here for months."

Delancy Street residents are often young, single mothers, and they are usually in and out of the program. "When I first came to Delancy Street," she said, "I was 18. I didn't know what I was doing. I was just trying to get by."

Today, Carvalho is a different person. She has a job and is living in Delancy Street. She is now 25 years old and has a baby girl. "I'm happy," she said. "I'm doing well."

Carvalho is one of many residents who have been successful in the program. "I've been here for two years," she said. "I've been able to get my life back on track."

Delancy Street provides a safe haven for residents who are struggling to make ends meet. "It's a wonderful place," Carvalho said. "I'm so grateful for everything they've done for me."

Residents like Carvalho are able to get their lives back on track with the help of the program. "I'm so grateful," she said. "I'm doing well."