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A major new player surfaces on the San Francisco scene as a 46-year-old woman makes a success of her runaway mate's drug rehabilitation empire. A report by CAROL POGASH:

The diminutive Mimi Silbert does something out of character: She pauses. She's standing beside her \$30 million housing and shopping development, under construction hard by the Bay. At 46, her face is so striking it draws attention to itself even in repose. Her rusty brown hair has an agenda all its own. Her tanned skin belies the hours she spends as president and CEO of the Delancey Street Foundation.

As she talks, blue eyes flash, arms windmill and listeners succumb. The apartments are being built by and for former druggies, criminals and the unemployed from the Delancey Street Foundation.

"Let me show you an apartment," Mimi says to a pair of U.S. Justice Department officials. "You might want to screw up your lives and live here."

Photographs by Kim Komenich

She laughs. She gestures toward the spot where there will be fountains, pool, health club, screening room and tiled piazza for Delancey Street residents. Out front, Delancey Street is building a huge restaurant, cleaners, shoe repair shop, deli, fish and vegetable market, all the services that residents of the new neighborhood of South Park, just south of the Bay Bridge, will need.

The guys from Justice are impressed. They want Delancey Street to become a model for federal rehab programs. One of the them chides Mimi. He says he bet three or four years ago she never envisioned this miracle of a project. "Yes I did,"

Mimi Silbert is leading the Delancey Street Foundation into a new era. Carol Pogash reports on the drug rehabilitation program and its dynamic leader.

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Mimi says, "There was no question in my mind."

When she learned it would be too expensive to buy Lone Mountain College or the Claremont Hotel, she decided Delancey Street would build its new home. A few problems arose on the way to Mimi's dream. A state tidelands law, written by her good friend Assemblyman John Burton, preserved the plot of land on which she wanted to build for maritime use. Building housing on the property was forbidden. The State Lands Commission had no plans to grant any exemptions. With help from Burton and Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, Mimi had a law passed permitting Delancey to build.

Her plumbers, electricians and pile drivers are people with experience mostly as thieves, murderers, and unskilled dope fiends. Abe Irizarry, the Delancey Street labor foreman, did have some experience: he helped pour the concrete for the handball court at San Quentin. She convinced the laborers, carpenters and all the unions to send a few skilled workers to train selected Delancey Street members, who would in turn teach other members.

"I never met a human being who doesn't think what we're doing is wonderful," Mimi said. "People just prefer it be done in another neighborhood."

Yet she was able to persuade developers on either



Mimi runs Delancey Street from her elaborate desk . . .



. . . and from the wheel of a bulldozer.

side of Embarcadero Triangle, as the new Delancey Street project is called, that recovering drug addicts make the best of neighbors. "I'm worried about your people," she told them. Who else could guarantee a drug-free environment?

She persuaded the Bank of America to give a \$10 million unsecured loan. The officers who made the deal got a standing ovation at the Delancey Street Seder last spring. "The place went wild," said Sarah Griffen, a BofA vice president. "It was the first time anyone ever publicly thanked me for lending them money."

At a love fest press conference, BofA chairman Tom Clausen likened it to BofA's financing of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Hollywood film industry and California agriculture.

"It's really like a miracle to me," Mimi said.

"She's Mother Teresa," says developer Al Wilsey, who gave the project its first \$100,000.

She is, observed Assemblyman Burton, "dynamite."

"Ninety-nine percent of real estate developers would have taken their losses and licked their wounds and gone home," says commercial broker Rick Mariano, a Delancey Street graduate, a board member and son-in-law to former Mayor Dianne Feinstein. Mimi succeeded, he said, "with no particular wizardry but with resolve."

"I don't stop," Mimi said. "We had to centralize and expand or slowly see the death process."


Delancey Street takes drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, violent felons and people who for whatever reason have hit bottom. "At Delancey Street it doesn't matter to us what you've done. Our criteria," Mimi said, "is that you want to change badly enough. We take people everybody thinks are losers. Then, with no experience, no funding, just these losers themselves, we develop their strengths," she said.

By learning various trades, acquiring an education and by teaching others, those who have always been powerless are given power. They do charitable works, "to balance the scales so that one day they can live with themselves," Mimi said. And they learn to have fun. After four years, she said, a member's life is so rich that "he's not willing to throw it away for some stupid drug."

So successful has the program become that it turns down 90 percent of its applicants, a situation Mimi finds intolerable. "Taking in desperate people is what we do," Mimi said. Delancey Street is based on a system of one member teaching another. Without the influx of new recruits, Mimi says, Delancey Street would die.

The 300 San Francisco Delancey Street members are squished into two facilities: the Pacific Heights mansion that serves as its headquarters and will not be sold even after the move to the Embarcadero Triangle, and "The Club," at Fulton and Eighth Avenue. The Embarcadero Triangle will allow what Mimi calls "The Delancey Street family" to live together and double its local membership.

From the beginning, some 17 years ago, Mimi eschewed all government grants forever. Handouts, she contends,



Mimi and Delancey Street members-turned-construction workers on the job at her \$30 million South Park project.

encourage dependency. Delancey Street would be self-sufficient. At Delancey Street Mimi proved to be a charismatic. All her life Mimi had been good, yet she somehow acquired street smarts as well. It was Mimi, Delancey Street members say, who designed the programs.

She has helped some 8,000 to 10,000 people turn their lives around.

"Throughout" said journalist and PR woman Melba Beals, a longtime Delancey Street supporter, Mimi never stopped being "Mama Mimi, the yin and yang of Delancey Street."