National rehabilitation leader celebrates Gate City success

By ANDY DUNCAN
Staff Writer

Within Mimi Silbert's San Francisco office, in a decaying Pacific Heights mansion turned into a showplace by convicted felons, is a file bulging with 6,000 letters from people asking her to set up Delancey Street programs in their areas.

Her stock reply is, "You're welcome to come down here, look around all you like, and steal it."

Silbert says her nationally acclaimed criminal-rehabilitation program simply doesn't have the means to blanket the country, to become the McDonald's of the corrections industry.

Besides, Delancey Street is busy building its biggest project yet, a $30 million headquarters on San Francisco's waterfront — constructed, staffed and funded by reforming drug addicts and criminals, Silbert's proud army of "losers" on the mend.

Why, the last thing Silbert wanted was to start yet another Delancey Street in a far-flung place like Greensboro. But repeated inquiries from Greensboro residents changed her mind. And as Greensboro's Delancey Street celebrates its second anniversary, Silbert says she's glad they convinced her.

"I feel so proud I want to burst, I really do," Silbert said Monday, admiring the elegant entrance hall at 811 N. Elm St., the 75-year-old Fisher Park home that houses 25 non-violent offenders. "I'm very proud of all the residents, and I'm proud of the area, because Greensboro has been extremely supportive."

She was pleased by the crowds at Sunday's Delancey Street open house. "People started coming before it had started, and they stayed after it was over," Silbert said. "People saying, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you for being here.'"

When Silbert turned 45 a couple of years ago, (See Silbert, A11)
San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein called her "a brilliant combination of intelligence and compassion, and a girl who doesn't seem to get too many plaques or garnet, either." She's received letters of praise from Ronald and Nancy Reagan as well as her father about her role in the movie.

Her non-profit Delancey Street Foundation was established on the premise that offenders live and work together in group homes, receive vocational training and job counseling, and learn to live in society. Residents also take part in recreational activities, such as physical fitness, music, and art, and learn about alcohol and drug treatment, and the bonds of friendship.

Delancey Street residents are expected to start pulling their weight and contributing to the community, and they are encouraged to hold chores and eventually progressing to outside jobs, which help fund the program.

Residents also expect to be able to move from temporary housing in a mobile home to permanent housing and eventually a job.

"We don't see ourselves as a program," Silbert said. "We're our own little community. That's why we took the name of a neighborhood."

Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of New York has been known as a home for immigrants, and many of the residents' parents came from this country, Eastern Europe, and were raised in similar environments.

"Everyone worked hard, the work ethic predominated, and hope never died. Many of the residents were able to build and make things happen, and they all looked out for one another and helped each other."

"It worked for the immigrants. It worked for the old-timers."

So it was, if we've invented anything. We just went back to the world we came from.

Silbert earned a doctorate in criminology and psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, and she's teaching there, working with people who are addicts and drug users and studying how they learn and what they need to stay clean.

Delancey Street has various business operations, including Delancey Street Movers, the largest in the country, and a chain of restaurants in California, New York, and New Mexico. The foundation has received donations from various sources, including grants from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations.

"Oh, once we became successful, we were offered grants," Silbert said. "We're trying to teach our own people self-reliance and a sense of responsibility."

"We say there's no other way to do it. This organization is going to continue, day to day to year and year, so that you learn a skill and go to work and make a living and contribute to society."

"We don't feed the world. We're teaching people how to feed themselves."

Delancey Street demonstrates that traditional American values still can work today, even among the poor and the homeless, and that it's possible to turn their lives around.

"This is not just a model for people who are poor today, it's a model for people, period," Silbert said. "We're not just helping individual people; we're helping whole communities."