

# Delancey Street route to recovery



Peggy Hammons, a recovering drug addict from Fort Worth, Texas, attributes her new gusto for life to the Delancey Street Foundation, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Brewster, N. Y.

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**BREWSTER** — There is a feeling permeating this place called Delancey Street — home to former drug addicts and prostitutes, burglars and thieves. It is one of security.

In this 19th-century granite mansion, the residents find the refuge they seek from the streets, where they once stole and robbed and sold their bodies for drug money.

They cherish the escape from their former friends, with whom they shared flophouses and heroin needles.

But mostly, they treasure the safety they seek from themselves and their self-destructive habits.

Many say they have found the security they need, but have never really known, at the Delancey Street Foundation, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center perched high on Turk Hill Road.

The mansion is home to one of five Delancey Street centers in the United States. Since 1971, when the anchor San Francisco foundation opened, more than 3,000 former addicts have been through Delancey Street programs, its members say. And thanks to Delancey Street's unusual method of rehabilitation, many have left with more than a new attitude. They leave with skills that prepare them for jobs in the outside world, something many of them never had.

Besides being a self-help rehabilitation center, the Delancey Street Foundation is a multimillion-dollar national business. As the primary aspect of their rehabilitation, the

former addicts leave behind their needles, put on business suits and work clothes, and go from their dorm rooms to the offices downstairs.

From their posts on the 92-acre estate in Brewster, for example, the residents run the Delancey Moving Co., promote college-bookstore novelties, make and sell wares, and procure donated supplies. Not a penny comes from the government. Because no one receives a salary, all the revenue from these businesses keeps the non-profit organization functioning.

But the real business of Delancey Street, the one money can't buy, is to put shattered lives back together.

Peggy Hammons, 40, takes the incoming calls with the style and grace of a switchboard operator at a Fortune 500 company.

"Hold the line, please," she says in a pleasant Texas drawl. "Yes, sir, I'm transferring you now."

Today, she has casually styled graying hair and an easy smile — she looks like somebody's mother. But, a year ago, she was shooting heroin. Lots of it.

"I had just gotten divorced after 15 years of marriage. I'd been with him since I was 14, and married at 19," she says. "When we got divorced, I got curious."

She pauses.

"A little too curious, I guess," she adds with a laugh. "I started hanging around with people who were into drugs. I was so naive. One night, I got drunk and shot dope. I

went from a naive ex-housewife to junkie overnight. I thought I was experimenting, that I'd go back to my own lifestyle. But, I went in nine months to what it takes most drug addicts 10 years."

Unable to continue it, she left her job as a private duty nurse. She began bartending.

"I crashed and burned. I have no doubt if I weren't here I would be dead."

A year ago next week, her family, devastated at what she was becoming, convinced her to call for an interview at Delancey Street in New Mexico.

"I had the interview to get my sister off my back," she recalls. "I had no intention of going straight."

But Hammons found at Delancey Street people who were, or had been, just like her: stubborn, depressed, recalcitrant, dying.

They helped her admit that she was an addict who needed help. They knew the symptoms intimately. Everyone at Delancey — from the director of the finance department to the dishwasher — is a former addict or ex-con.

Herein, the residents say, lies the secret to the success Delancey Street Foundation enjoys: The former addicts are able to relate to what the new resident is experiencing. They do not tolerate lies. They do not stand for surly attitudes. The new resident must want to change. Then, the more seasoned residents can guide the new ones through rehabilitation — while teaching the vocational and personal skills they so sorely lacked when they entered.

Delancey Street does not have facilities to treat drug addiction or alcoholism. There are no doctors, psychologists or sociologists on staff.

The program has received plaudits from officials across the country, including San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein and the chief of that city's police department.

From the first day at Delancey Street — named for a street in New York that was a haven for immigrants at the turn of the century — abusers begin what is called "re-education."

Scraggly-looking men are shaved clean, explained John Lilly, a 35-year-old former addict who saw the last of his long hair and beard when he checked in more than eight years ago.

"It's their first slap of reality," says Lilly, who has since grown

back a well-trimmed mustache. "It's like, 'OK, let's shave you and see how you like that.'"

Women, similarly, turn over their makeup and jewelry. Then, along with the men, they're given mops and brooms and told to clean the 20-room mansion.

Those with heroin withdrawal symptoms, such as the shakes, are given no mercy.

"You sweat it out with a broom in your hands," says Cynthia Johnson, 30, who, until 14 months ago, shot heroin for 12 years.

As residents — who range in age from 18 to 58 — go about their daily regimen, they are encouraged to show motivation, self-discipline, a positive attitude. As they grow, they work their way up from laborious jobs to ones with more responsibility. Peers already assigned to higher posts decide when the new residents are ready to move ahead.

Everyone is up early: Breakfast is served from 6:30 to 7:30 a.m. Work begins immediately after that. Break is at 10:15 a.m., lunch at noon. At 12:30 p.m. is something called "seminar." There, residents meet in the main foyer of the mansion, and in front of a fireplace, spend 30 minutes discussing their feelings about particular topics, such as gratitude. Work continues until 4:30 p.m. A recreation period follows.

Then, everyone — whether they run the finance department or clean the bathrooms — dresses for a candlelight dinner.

"It's all part of the new image . . . to create self-esteem," says Lilly, who has advanced to the helm of the Delancey Moving Co. "Most of them like to dress up. They start seeing themselves look OK and they like it."

Everyone is expected to adhere to three cardinal rules: No violence. No threats of violence. No alcohol or drugs. Breaking them is grounds for expulsion. Talking curtly to someone is punishable by a night washing dishes.

All of this is designed to strip the maladjusted addicts of their self-centeredness. As Tom Lynch, 33, a recovered alcoholic, says at this day's seminar, he is grateful for it.

"I'm grateful I have a family and that I now have a rapport with that family. And I'm grateful for friends for keeping their foot where it needed to be, even though it hurt."



This 19th-century mansion built by circus maven Seth B. Howes is home to the Delancey Street Foundation.

Nine years ago, John Lilly was headed for jail for the third time — for drug-related burglaries — when he learned of Delancey Street from his probation officer in San Francisco, a man he will never forget named Ken Hopkins.

"He went to court and stood up for me," Lilly said. "I still call him every once in a while to say how I'm doing."

People do fail here. Delancey Street President Mimi Silbert — a former prison psychologist and just about the only one in the entire organization who is not a former addict — said the attrition rate is 35 percent.

"Of these, the majority leave in their first few months of their stay. Of those who leave, some return to Delancey Street and do well the second time," she said. "Some may survive well on the street. Some go to prison. Some die."

They fail because they didn't want to succeed badly enough, the residents here say.

Flitting around the kitchen with the efficiency of a New York City chef, Cynthia Johnson, oversees the preparation of the days' lunch (homemade soup and chicken salad sandwiches), and dinner (pork chops, vegetables, salad).

It's a far cry from where she was until last year.

Since she was 17, heroin had ruled her life. It led her to jail, and when she got out of prison, it snatched her up and led her astray again.

Finally, with the help of her attorney, she found out about Delancey Street. She had tried other rehabilitation centers, but always had failed.

"Before, I didn't want to change. I just went to get the heat off me," she said of Delancey Street.

"I was just tired. Tired of going to jail. Tired of disappointing my family," she said. "I always knew there was a better way. It took me 12 years to find it."

Today, as head of Delancey Street's kitchen, she supervises a staff of six. She makes breakfast, lunch and dinner for 18 full-time

residents and daily guests who sometimes boost the number of diners to 40.

"I never thought I'd be running a kitchen. Here I am 14 months later. I got a lot of responsibility. People trust me and that means a lot. That really means a lot," she said.

When the Delancey Street Foundation bought the 19th-century stone mansion in 1980, some Brewster residents were unhappy about the prospect of "the drug addicts on the hill," says Delancey Street finance director Jerry Raymond, a former addict and male prostitute.

People shouted slurs as they drove by. They threw trash at the mansion.

Bad will turned to good feelings when residents strung Christmas lights from one end of the mansion to the other. They collected toys for the needy and the sick and deli-

vered them to hospitals and houses. They solicited donated checkboards and turned them over to senior citizens.

"Now, they're beginning to see that we're good neighbors," Raymond said. "It's definitely beginning to turn around."

The telephone rings and Scott Pickett, 24, jumps to get it.

"No, that's not high enough," he is saying. "I really want something that starts at about \$25,000, plus commission. . . . No, insurance sales is not good, I have no experience in that."

After three years at Delancey Street, Pickett is looking for a job.

When he came, he was a wise-cracking addict. He had broken into a drug store and stolen from anyone he could, including his parents.

Today, he laughs and jokes and talks about music. His hairstyle, short and spiked slightly on top, is straight from Gentlemen's Quarterly. He's wearing a tan suit and striped tie. A scarf is draped over his shoulders.

He expects to get hired. In fact, he says, he's already turned down some jobs.

"I've been totally honest with (the potential employers). I show them my resume. I explain what Delancey Street is, why I'm here and what I did to get here," he says.



Stephanie Fiaherty, 26, a former addict and prostitute, earned a high-school equivalency diploma at Delancey Street and now runs its retail sales department.

"They've been receptive. They appreciate the honesty."

Of course, he doesn't mention on the telephone that he is an ex-convict from New Mexico. He only says that he works in the sales department of an independent, non-profit organization. He'll tell them the whole story when he's face to face "to see how they react," he says.



Cynthia Johnson, left, and Yvonne Dockery, prepare meals for as many as 40 residents and guests every day. Johnson, a former heroin addict, is the kitchen supervisor.

"It's not like I have a pitch that I run. If they want to know about it, I'll tell them," he says.

It is a momentary lapse that embarrasses her, Stephanie Flaherty, 26, has to look up her own personal file to spell her 5½-year-old daughter's name.

"It's Tanisha — T-A. Not T-I. Tanisha Elizabeth Flaherty," she says.

Tanisha was 6 months old when Flaherty checked into Delancey Street. Since then, Flaherty has seen her five times.

"It's really tough," says Flaherty, who has worked her way through to "The Vatican Room," the central office that is a cross between personnel department and headmaster's office. The little girl, she explains, is "why I've hung in here. I didn't want my daughter to know her mother OD'd in a hotel room."

Flaherty began "smoking weed and drinking" at 12, and quit school at 15. At 18 or 19 ("I can't remember, really"), she married a drug dealer. After that, she lived on San Francisco's streets, in flophouses, living on potato chips and Pepsi and shooting drugs. Prostitution followed. She was in and out of jail for passing bad checks and stealing jewelry.

Today, besides running the Vatican Room, she heads up the retail sales department.

Never caring how she looked before, everything about her today says professional. She looks healthy. She speaks clearly. She laughs a lot.

"I did a whole revamp of my personality. I did it by watching role models. Pretty soon, you're the top sales person. You're doing pretty good and you're rolling."

Thomas Jackson, a 36-year-old former addict, shares her confidence. Now an advertising specialist, he's looking forward to the day when he is ready to leave.

"If I keep up a constructive and positive attitude, I won't go back," he says. "I've never made plans before. Now, I'm starting to make them and I know I can carry them out. It is rewarding."



At a seminar on "gratitude," Scott Pickett, a former burglar and addict, tells other residents he is grateful his parents "don't have to lock up the silver when I come home anymore."



Resident John Lilly, 35, runs Delancey's moving company.