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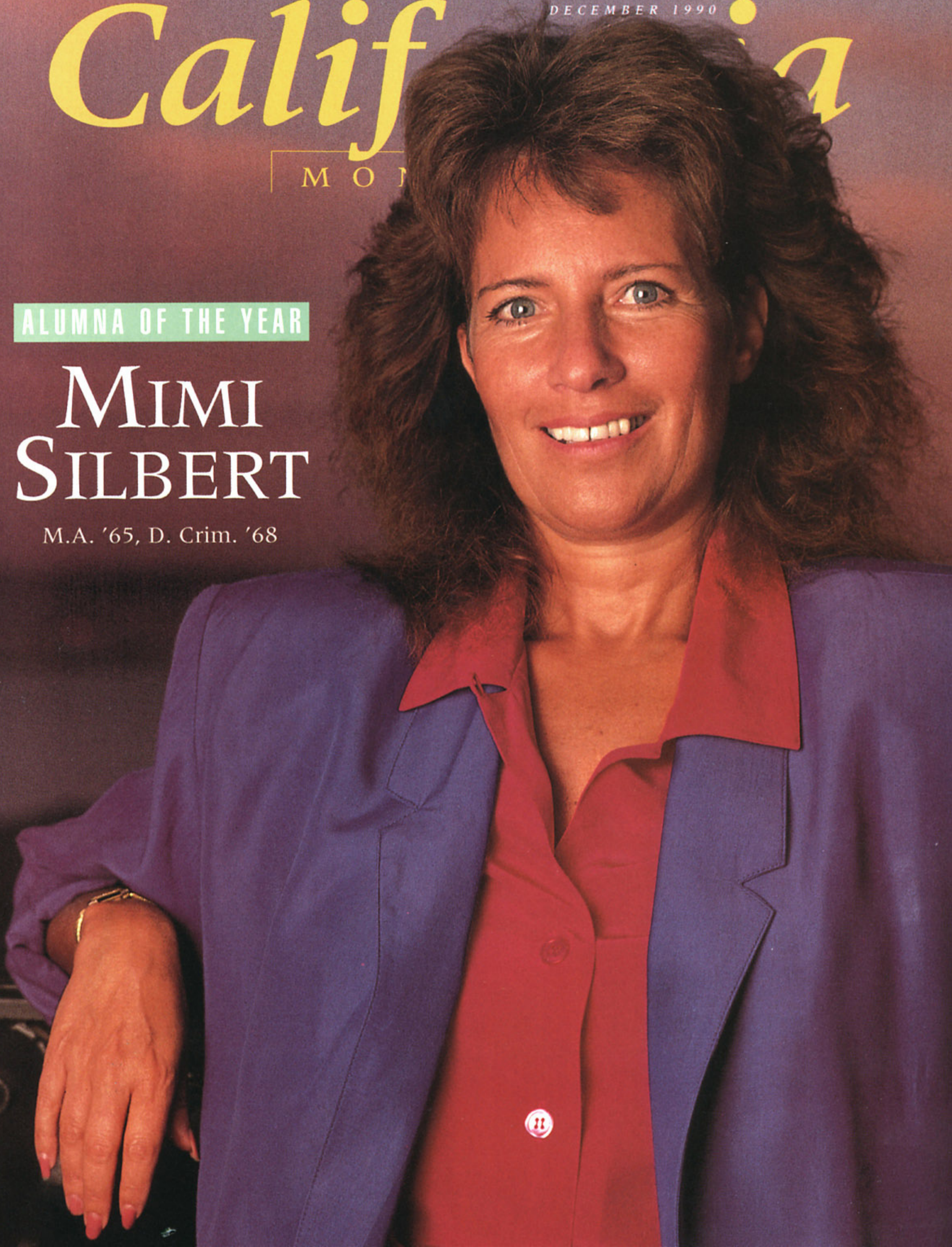
DECEMBER 1990

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ALUMNA OF THE YEAR

MIMI SILBERT

M.A. '65, D. Crim. '68



A conversation with
MIMI SILBERT

BY WILLIAM RODARMOR

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HEN MIMI SILBERT STARTS TALKING, nothing can stop her. Whether it's drug policy, the new complex she's built on the San Francisco waterfront, or her years as a student in Paris and Berkeley, she leaves no room for well-modulated WASPs trying to get a demurrer in edgewise. The

California Alumni Association's 1990 Alumna of the Year, Silbert, M.A. '65, D. Crim. '68, is the president of the Delancey Street Foundation, arguably the most successful drug rehabilitation program in the country. To make her listen, you do what her family did: you butt in and scream.

Silbert is the product of a lot of screaming. She comes from a loving, tight Jewish family, she says, "where there was no such thing as a polite family dinner. Everyone felt the responsibility to tell you what you should do with your life at all times."

When she was little, she wanted to grow up and help her father in the corner pharmacy in Brookline, Massachusetts. Instead, at 21, she found herself walking into Washington D.C.'s Lorton Youth Center, leaving staff and inmates alike slack-jawed to see that their new correctional treatment specialist was a red-headed woman standing barely five feet tall.

Today, the 48-year-old Silbert has



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Q & A

a doctorate in criminology from Berkeley, is a member of the California Board of Corrections, and has practically devoted her life to an experiment in drug rehabilitation started by her late husband, John Maher. He knew that the usual government-financed treatment programs were failing the vast majority of drug abusers. Maher contacted Silbert, who was teaching criminology at Berkeley, and asked her to help. She agreed, and suggested they call the group "Delancey Street" after the street on New York's Lower East Side where immigrants congregated at the turn of the century. Because, she says, the addicts and criminals who enter the program "are a group of people who don't know how to make their way in American society. Like immigrants, they have to band together, to get strength from supporting each other."

From the start, hard work has been a key part of the Delancey Street experience. Incoming junkies go cold turkey—Silbert once said that getting over addiction is no worse than surviving a bad flu—and are handed a broom as soon as they're well enough to stand. Progressing up the Delancey Street hierarchy means washing sheets, making beds, and walking security patrols. But most of all, it means learning. "If you can't read or write when you come here," says Silbert, "you'll learn. Period." In order to "graduate," residents must acquire at least three marketable skills, most learned on the spot. Delancey Street is involved in construction, home moving, catering, printing, wood products, Christmas tree sales, and wholesale marketing. Over the years, it has helped thousands of hard-core criminals move into the mainstream economy. Virtually all land jobs when they leave, and some have become marketing executives, accountants, and attorneys. The organization itself has spread to Los Angeles, New Mexico, upstate New York, and Greensboro, N.C., and currently has a total of 850 residents.

Bronx-born John Maher was seen as the more outrageous and outspoken of the two, but since his death Silbert has emerged as a leader in her own right. The complex she's managed to build on the San Francisco waterfront is testament enough to Silbert's persuasive ways. Called Embarcadero Triangle, it's a reddish, four-story complex that sits on three waterfront acres at the corner of Brannan Street and the Embarcadero. The complex has 177 apartments for some 500 Delancey Street residents above a ground floor of shops and restaurants—managed mainly by the residents.

But Embarcadero Triangle isn't just another snazzy low-rise. It's a \$15-million triumph of sweat equity, built almost entirely by Delancey Street residents. It's also a tribute to Silbert's political connections. The building sits on land

Charter Day and Banquet

On Friday, March 22, Charter Day will be celebrated on the Berkeley campus—for the first time since 1985—as Chang-Lin Tien is inaugurated as Berkeley's seventh chancellor. That same evening, at the 123rd Charter Banquet in San Francisco, Mimi Silbert will be honored as the Alumni Association's Alumna of the Year. She is only the third woman to be so honored. (The first two were Lilian Gilbreth in 1954 and Joan Didion in 1980.) For Banquet reservations and further information, contact Nancy Barker at Alumni House, (415) 642-1574.

leased from the city's redevelopment agency, and to get it Silbert had to overcome a major hurdle: the state had originally banned housing on the site. Silbert cashed in some political IOU's to get a special law passed which allowed Delancey Street to build.

Now nearly completed, the complex fairly reeks of good taste. It includes an interior courtroom with a distinctly Italian flavor, a swimming pool, classrooms, and a spectacular dining room. Abstract paintings hang on pastel walls, hardwood parquet gleams underfoot, and the windows face a million-dollar view of the Bay and the Bay Bridge. Silbert claims that a beautiful environment is an essential part of the program: "Our residents don't have any experience with how most of America lives," she says. "We teach them how to set a table, make lunch, and go to the opera." By improving their image—inside and out—Silbert says Delancey Street gives them a sense of worth and of belonging to the larger community.

Q: *It seems that an important part of Delancey Street is the way it presents itself. And that ranges from polished hardwood floors to the way people dress and behave. Why?*

A: Well, starting with the residents, image is probably the key feature of these people's lives. The average person who comes to Delancey Street has been in and out of prison four times; is functionally illiterate; and hasn't worked at even an unskilled job for six months at a time. They're angry and extremely antisocial. Since they've failed at just about everything, image is *critical* to them.

Q: *So what happens when they come to Delancey Street?*

A: When people come here, we ask them to stay for two years. They all promise to stay, but of course they never really mean it. They figure they'll get cleaned up, get a few good meals, get healthy, and move on. So they're manipulating us. Our job is to out-manipulate *them*. And we start immediately with their image. When they arrive, they're wearing these shiny clothes that are ten sizes too tight. And they have to cut their hair, get into a suit and tie, and change the way they walk—no rolling your shoulders; you learn to walk with your head straight. So we make people immediately trade a street image in for a clean, upstanding citizen image.

Q: *Suppose I say I don't want to, and you can't make me.*

A: Great! I wouldn't dream of it! If you don't want to do what we do, then *please* leave! Our [intake] interview *never* asks you to come to Delancey Street. On the contrary, we explain to you what we do, how tough it is. Everyone doing those interviews has done time, and will tell you that doing time in prison is *much* easier. In jail, you have no choices to make. It's your world, and if you understand it, you can be a somebody there. You may not *like* it, but it's very comfortable. So at Delancey Street, we don't ever recruit. Our interview is set up to see if you have enough will to push your way in.

Q: *Don't you have any criteria in admitting people?*

A: Well, we don't take repeat sex offenders. I did some work at Atascadero, I've worked with compulsive sexual offenders, and I believe that they absolutely need professional counseling. We also don't take very withdrawn psychotics, because we could do them harm. In any case, the people who come to Delancey Street are pretty much the ones who should be here: they're all nasty, vicious, really

antisocial, self-destructive, self-hating, and other-hating people.

Q: *Do you really believe this? Aren't these people who merely have been labeled this way?*

A: Oh, no! When these people walk in the door, and you know what they've done with their lives, it's just horrible. Not all of them; some have only managed to only hurt themselves and the ones they love. And these kinds of criminals tend to be terrific con artists. They can cry and sob, and con you. But deep down, they hate themselves for getting opportunities too easily, so they rip them apart, because they felt they hadn't earned them. So when you come in to Delancey Street, there's not an inch of trust. There's not a hole anywhere; because if there is one, we know you'll go for it.

And the truth is, these people honestly, completely change who they are—people without either scruples or decency develop character and an overwhelming concern for others. But for a long time, there's no feeling there. Because if you do enough horrible things, you can't let yourself feel, or you'd probably have to shoot yourself. So you make sure you don't feel. You feel no guilt, no concern, nothing. And you justify it; you rationalize it; you hate, and you blame outward.

Q: *That must take a lot of energy.*

A: An enormous amount of energy! And then you come to a place like Delancey Street and we ask you to let go of all that. We don't change people from the inside out. We change them from the inside in. You act *as if* you're decent, *as if* you care about people, *as if* you're kind and good. And eventually you learn to become all those things.

So we're very strict on behavior. On helping other people, in the belief that one day you'll make this Kierkegaardian leap of faith. You keep helping, working, and learning, and then one day, when you least suspect it, something happens with one of the people you've been told to help. All of a sudden, *you care*. You have no idea why it happened that Tuesday at four o'clock. But suddenly there's a real caring there for a minute. And then you build on that, and it starts to become real.

Q: *What you're describing sounds a bit like Zen enlightenment. Have you been involved in any of the personal growth movements?*

A: In Berkeley I did a lot of encounter groups and psychodrama. But aside from that, I'm one of those people who has never taken the est training or read a self-help

book—even though I'm actually in the self-help movement. I think I'm a very traditional person. I model Delancey Street almost totally after my family.

Q: *Do I smell gefilte fish in the air?*

A: [laughs] Oh, it's definitely very Jewish—or actually, very *ethnic*. Mine was an extended family, with very traditional values: support each other; if you have a feeling, say your feeling right away. And it has nothing to do with “space,” “You do your thing and I'll do my thing.” Like immigrant families did who had tons of kids, and the oldest kids took care of the next, and the next the next. And if it wasn't kids,

it was uncles and cousins and aunts. That support was infuriating, but it gave you a platform from which to jump off and make a life.

Q: *So what makes a nice girl like you leave warm, loving Massachusetts to come to Berkeley?*

A: I came for graduate school because Berkeley is where *anybody* would want to come for graduate school. Though I snuck off to Paris along the way. I spent a little time studying under Jean-Paul Sartre, so there's a bit of existentialism in my thinking that says you have to make your own life.

When I came to Berkeley in the early sixties, everything was possible, everything was being done. We felt we could change the nature of the world. It's true that our country didn't go on to do lots of the things we thought we were starting.

But I believed in them, and went on to find a way to carry them out.

Q: *Especially after the Vietnam era, a lot of people in your generation lost hope. How did you manage not to?*

A: I guess it's how you see things. We didn't affect the result, but we affected the process of our lives enormously. Through hope; through people coming together; through believing that something could happen. So I believe in the domino theory. I believe that I affect you, and you affect someone else. . . . It might take longer than I'd like, but something has to happen.

And being at Berkeley, you get the sense—which I love—that you're walking around hallowed halls. Real minds have done things there. It's wonderful, because it's in the air; it was for me. Quite honestly, in Delancey Street we try to emulate that. We try to have our physical surroundings be beautiful, so that you can feel that you're part of something beautiful. Try to have knowledge in the air, so you feel “God, all kinds of learning is going on here.” “Hallowed halls” is a big deal because you try to live up to them. And beautiful environment is a big deal, because you



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try to live up to it.

Q: *When you started to build this place, you said, "To be a developer you need a tough belly and a crazed vision. And I already have these qualities working at Delancey Street."*

A: It's absolutely true. The people who come to Delancey Street have already been labeled unamenable to treatment. In my day they called them psychopaths; nowadays I guess they call them sociopaths. And if you choose to live with hope for these people, you have to have that kind of vision that charges through brick walls and refuses to see that the bricks might be hard.

Q: *So you're crazy, right?*

A: Absolutely. And I've stayed that way: really hopeful, really excited, really a believer after two decades of many successes, but also many betrayals and painful realities. That's the way I feel about Delancey Street; it's too important a task to hear a "no." And that just rolls right over into doing a building, because most of what you hear is why it can't happen.

Q: *How did you get the construction trades to go along with your plan to have Delancey Street residents build the place themselves?*

A: That was only one of many impossibilities [laughs]! I met with the unions a number of times, and went over two main facts. First, we've spent years being extremely supportive of the labor movement. Second, this particular piece of property couldn't be developed by anyone else.

Q: *So the unions wound up welcoming you.*

A: And they were terrific! We hired only a few outside people, but of course they were union members. And they helped train our residents in all kinds of skills. At the start, we had five guys who knew construction, and 300 who had never so much as held a hammer. And they learned *everything!* Not everyone here majored in construction, of course, but we trained a number of them as contractors, and some are starting their own businesses.

Q: *But the construction trades are the hardest to get into, particularly for blacks and Hispanics.*

A: You know, there were a million wonderful things about this building project, but one terrific thing was that the union people we did hire became part of the Delancey Street family. Never in a million years did they think they would have anything to do with people like us. Yet, to a person, they ended up coming back for dinner and to the parties. And each one had people that they trained, that

they now worry about, and yell at, and ask how are they doing! They really took them under their wings as people.

Q: *To what extent do you stay in touch with the people who have graduated from Delancey Street?*

A: At this point, they stay in touch with us. And I don't know that we would have grown as much over the years if it weren't for our graduates. They come back to tutor and give seminars; some of them take people and mentor them. They're *always* lugging people over to their homes. And a lot of our graduates marry each other and bring their little darlings over. So I'm already like a great-great-great-grandmother in the Delancey chain of people and children.

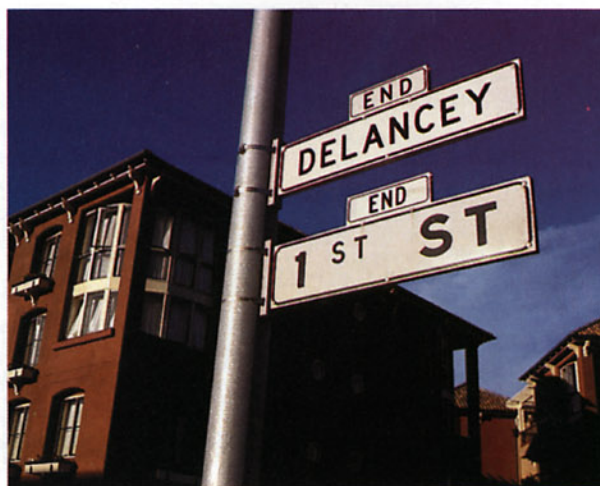
Q: *How does the neighborhood react when you move into a place like Brewster, New York? Let's face it, Delancey Street people have the initial appeal of a toxic waste dump.*

A: Absolutely. The neighbors were *very* upset when we first moved in, and we were picketed for a long time. People say all those things: you're coming to rape their wives and children, and so on. And I understand the initial fear. It takes people a while to understand that while our residents once were angry, violent criminals, they're trying so hard to change, they're more earnestly "good" than most citizens you find. Besides, when we move into a new place, we immediately fix up any building we get, and start doing neighborhood patrols. So property values go up and crime goes down.

Q: *What makes Delancey Street's approach different from, say, former drug czar William Bennett's?*

A: One, we choose to be unfunded, because we're trying to empower powerless people, and to do that, they have to be responsible for what goes on in their lives, instead of having it handed to them. Two, we have no paid staff. At Delancey Street we make everybody be the teacher, we make everybody be the therapist. How people change is never so much what I'm doing for you that changes you, but what you're doing for someone else.

I believe that *totally*. What makes this organization unique is that it isn't really even "self-help," it's "help-others." That's what makes the organization work. You come here, and we say to you, "You're going to help other people. If in the process of teaching somebody else job skills, or helping somebody change their life, you happen to change *your* life, great! But what you're coming here to do is really to change someone else's life, to do something outside of yourself." We make them active agents of change, and that's an enormous empowerment. ☺



'The people who come to Delancey Street are the ones who should be here: they're nasty, vicious, and self-destructive.'