

## Delancey Street Foundation

### At S.F. center, ex-cons rebuild desperate lives



Bee/Owen Brewer

An unskilled alcoholic and drug user three years ago, Peter Liotta helped build the walls at Delancey Street's \$30 million dream home.

By Gretchen Kell

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SAN FRANCISCO — Defying the skeptics and amazing even themselves, about 350 former convicts and drug addicts are building their own \$30 million dream home on a choice triangle of bayside property.

The Mediterranean-style complex of apartments and shops soon will become a new headquarters for the Delancey Street Foundation, a nationally known residential treatment center founded here in 1971.

But to its residents, who once lived destructive lives and had few if any job skills, the Embarcadero Triangle isn't just a new address. It represents the first constructive task they've done in years. It also represents the new lives they're struggling to build.

"I did these walls. These are my walls," said 35-year-old Peter Liotta, conducting a proud tour of a large room overlooking San Francisco Bay. An unskilled Liotta arrived at Delancey Street in 1987, hopelessly hooked on alcohol and cocaine and craving help.

"This is more than just a home," said Mimi Silbert, the feisty criminologist who single-handedly runs the foundation that operates without government funds. "It's such a physical symbol of, 'Yes, we can do it!'"

When construction on the triangular project began two years ago, a handful of residents were taught by professionals how to frame walls, install plumbing, texture and finish walls and lay tile. In turn, that group taught the others. Today the work is 90 percent complete.

Sometime this year residents will move from two cramped San Francisco structures into 177 new apartments in the complex. With room for 700, the complex could allow Delancey Street to double its population. The group will operate its own restaurant, health club, movie theater and shops. A heated outdoor pool and spa will be shaded by wisteria and bougainvillea.

Painted in warm earth tones and covered with flower boxes, the buildings will showcase a series of stained-glass windows — all designed and handmade at Delancey Street. The windows trace the evolution of a flower from a tightly closed bud to an open bloom — a blossoming that "makes a statement" about human potential, said Silbert.

The typical Delancey Street resident has been a hard-core drug addict, in and out of prison, functionally illiterate and unskilled, she said. The foundation's mostly male population ranges in age from 18 to about 60.

"People who come to Delancey Street are cynical," added Silbert, a former student in Paris of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. "... They're convinced they're never going to make it."

The foundation is named after the Delancey Street on New York's Lower East Side, where at the turn of the century immigrants fresh from Ellis Island got their bearings before entering the American mainstream.

Silbert, 47, whose parents emigrated from Eastern Europe in the 1930s, considers Delancey Street a "residential educational center" where life's losers gain the skills they need to participate successfully in society.

Residents are tutored in reading, writing and math until they receive a high school degree. Afterward, many attend college or professional schools. They also learn to set a table, eat in fancy cafes, doff their hats to show respect and resolve problems in gripe groups.

At Delancey Street's moving company, Christmas tree lots and other businesses that draw income for the foundation, residents learn job skills and proper work habits. Workers at the Embarcadero Triangle project have learned an array of construction skills.

"Every nail that's crooked, we take it out and do it again," said Silbert. "You didn't do it right? The answer is, 'Do it again and get it right!'"

Adored by Delancey Street residents, Silbert is a motherly yet tough role model. If one of her three rules is broken — no alcohol or drugs, no violence and no threats of physical violence — the offender is kicked out.

"I've had people literally sobbing, grabbing my ankles, people I know and love," she said. "It doesn't matter."

Twenty-five percent of newcomers to Delancey Street leave within three months. But many of them return home to this unique, tightly knit extended family headed by Silbert.

"When I hear her speak, I always cry," said Robert Rocha, 24, a former San Diego gang member who first used heroin at age 13 and was in San Quentin by age 20. "She knows me so well, what I need to fight for."

Now Rocha works alongside rival gang members at the Embarcadero Triangle. "We have to learn to be friends now," he said.

Graduates of the foundation "speak for themselves," said Bill Maher, 42. One of Delancey Street's first residents, today he is a member of the county Board of Supervisors.

The seeds of Delancey Street were planted when Maher's brother John, a former heroin addict, approached Silbert to help him develop a rehabilitation program run by ex-cons for

ex-cons. The two not only became co-presidents of Delancey Street, they also fell in love. In 1988, John Maher died of a heart attack.

Neither Delancey Street nor the Embarcadero Triangle, built on land subleased from the city's redevelopment agency, receives government money. The 350,000-square-foot project would have cost \$30 million, Silbert said. But with 90 percent of the work done by residents and with donated goods and services, it will cost only \$14 million.

The bill is being paid through the sale of other Delancey Street properties in San Francisco, earnings from the foundation's businesses and fund raising. Silbert said she expects to be \$1 million short.

That isn't likely to deter the goals of growing Delancey Street, which has centers in Los Angeles, New York, New Mexico and North Carolina, and widespread support.

"It's a miracle to watch it," said San Francisco Police Chief Frank Jordan. "Each year they get stronger in developing credibility and trust."

In the early days of Delancey Street, neighbors of the upscale Pacific Heights mansion that served as its residence worried that the group would bring blight and crime.

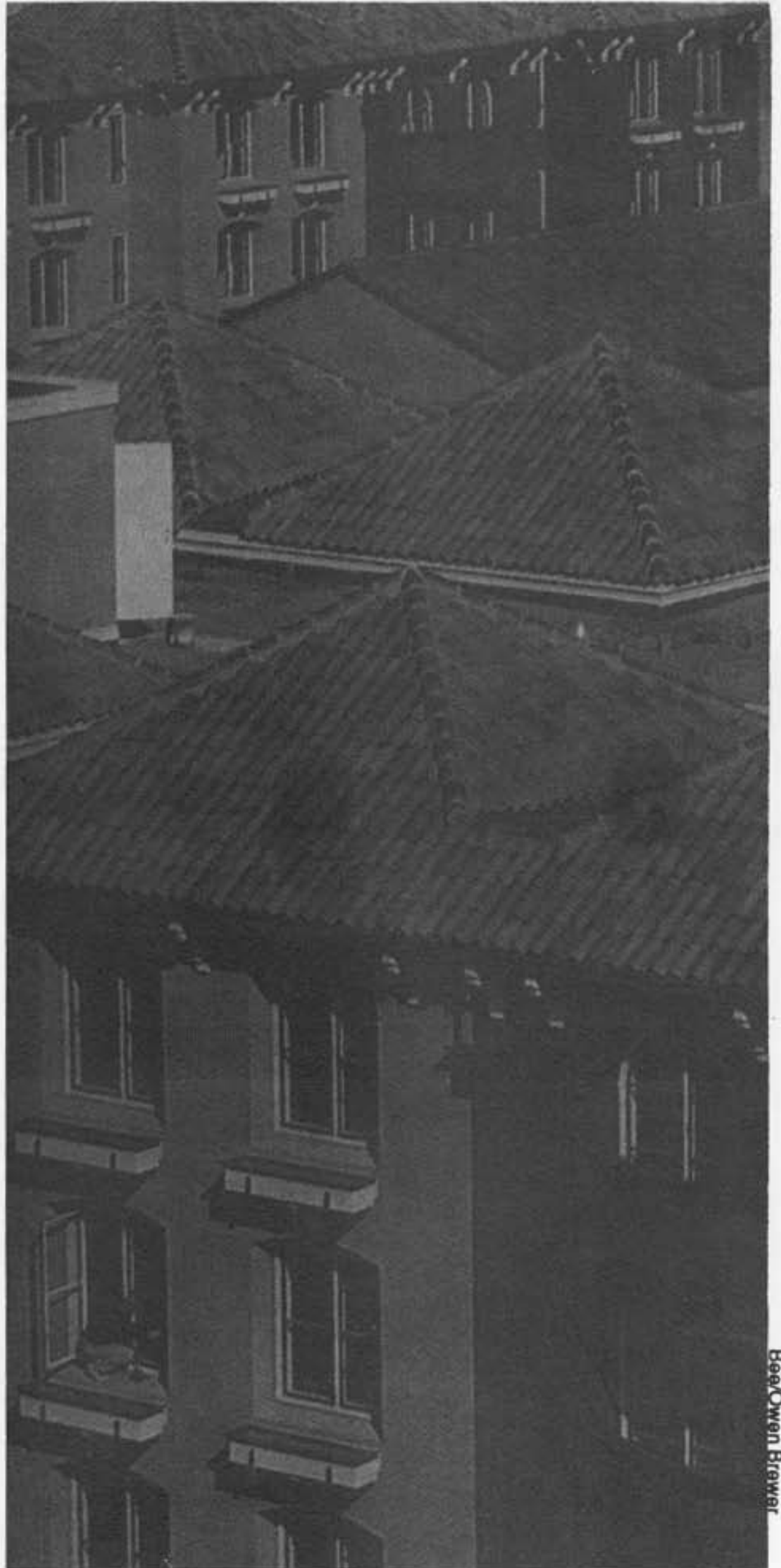
Silbert said rocks were thrown through the mansion's windows and neighbors "went crazy."

"They weren't thrilled to know that it (the mansion) was bought by a group of ex-everythings," she said. But skeptics caught the former convicts and addicts doing only charitable work and guarding against crime, said Jordan.

"There's always a negative connotation to (Delancey Street)," said Jordan, "but every time they go somewhere they turn it around by their actions."

The Embarcadero Triangle is further proof yet of what Delancey Street is made of, said Bill Maher.

"If you asked the construction industry if you could rehabilitate ex-cons and junkies to build this project, they'd say no," he said. "Once again, this (shows) that the human spirit can triumph over anything."



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Daniel Morgan, a Delancey Street resident, builds a future for himself by washing windows, left, at the nearly completed Embarcadero Triangle project.