

Delancey Street: Non-prison that works

By KATHY COE
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Delancey Street burned its mortgage in May.

There was a reception, an elegant affair. The stately house on North Elm Street was glowing, with flowers, new carpet and finished woodwork throughout. In the front hall on a table was the silver bowl where the mortgage actually met its match.



Coe

This community of convicted criminals and substance abusers paid for its house in three years. When it opened in late 1987, the project had the backing of a small group of community supporters and the somewhat tentative forbearance of its neighbors in Fisher Park. The program has more than justified their faith.

Delancey Street North Carolina isn't a street, but a place where people change their lives. It's one of four Delancey Street homes in the country; all accept people who otherwise would go to prison. It gives them one choice: to become productive, responsible, self-respecting citizens.

It's named after the street on the lower East Side of New York where immigrants once had their first orientation to life in America; in a very real way, it is an orientation in responsible living.

In the average 3½-year stay, Delancey Street graduates learn marketable skills and further their education. They work — in the program's moving business, for instance, or in retail sales. They must dress and conduct themselves in a way that commands the respect of the community. Far more important, they restructure their lives on the basis of their own hard work and trustworthiness.

Over time, they build trust in themselves and in each other. Nobody is in Delancey Street very long before he or she has to take some responsibility for keeping someone else on the right track. They are a family, often tough but sometimes gentle. As a result, when one backslides, everyone gets hurt.



Mimi Silbert

Mimi Silbert is the psychologist and criminologist who founded the first Delancey Street in San Francisco. From her office there she spoke to me about what makes the program work.

"In traditional therapy," Silbert said, "problems are isolated and dealt with individually — drugs, literacy, unemployment. Delancey Street looks at the situation horizontally rather than vertically. We try to give people everything."

Second, Silbert said, Delancey Street doesn't rely on experts. In the process of surviving, Delancey Street residents have had to learn to build buildings and operate a computer system.

Delancey Street changes people's lives from the outside in. It provides the structure into which people grow. It teaches them how to function in the world, from preparing and eating regular sit-down meals to knowing how to give a successful job interview.

There are three ways to leave it. One is by graduating and moving out into an inde-

pendent, responsible life. Hundreds have already graduated across the country. Though Delancey Street doesn't publish numbers, it does maintain that a greater percentage of its graduates lead crime-free, addiction-free lives than people who leave prison.

As in every alternative program, there are dropouts. Silbert says as many as one-fifth leave during the grueling first three months, mostly from lingering despair about their former lives of drug or alcohol addiction and crime. When people drop out the whole family suffers.

It's also possible to get kicked out of Delancey Street. There are three cardinal rules: 1) no violence; 2) no threats of violence; and 3) no drugs or alcohol. Break one of those and you're out with no second chance.

Delancey Street North Carolina can take 25 residents at a time. In just three years, a few of its residents have already graduated.

In view of this success in the private sector, why is North Carolina committing \$200 million to new prison building? Why aren't we looking at alternatives we know to be more effective?

Delancey Street has worked in Greensboro because of its residents' own courage. But having local citizens assist in the initial financing helped (no tax dollars are involved). The project is now self-sustaining, but those community friends continue to offer encouragement. That kind of support would be essential if Delancey Street's approach were tried in other communities.

I asked Mimi Silbert what might work better for North Carolina than more prisons. She recommended a wide range of community-based options — including prisons for the very few who do need to be separated from society.

"You can never build your way out of crime," Silbert said. She suggested that if politicians were more direct, they would admit that what they routinely advocate is sending criminals to a place that is paid for by taxpayers, where criminals do no work, have lots of leisure time and learn nothing.

"If they actually suggested that, people would just laugh," she said. Yet that is what we do with criminals, in ever-increasing numbers. You tell me why.