



The most effective treatment programs view recovery as a continuing process which transforms the drug addict's life. Giving up drugs is only the first step. Gaining the personal strength and practical skills necessary to lead a productive life is often far more difficult. Most drug offenders have never possessed these skills, and very few programs provide help in acquiring them.

Delancey Street, a residential treatment program in San Francisco, teaches the most serious drug-addicted criminals everything they need to know to become model citizens. The program focuses on the entire person and his ability to function successfully in daily life rather than on his drug addiction and criminal history. To emphasize the importance of self-reliance,

Delancey Street supports its operations from its own business enterprises and does not take any government funds. Its residents learn to pay their way through hard work and group effort at the same time they are working on overcoming their addiction.

Mimi Silbert, an energetic, intense woman, created Delancey Street twenty years ago after completing a Ph.D. in criminology and psychology at the University of California at Berkeley and working in the state prison system. Silbert explains that Delancey Street is really a residential educational center to bring people at the bottom of American society into the mainstream. Underlying Delancey's success, she believes, is its power to replicate the experience of a supportive, nurturing family for people who have never had it.

"At the turn of the century, Eastern European Jewish immigrants came to Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of New York," Silbert explains. "They lived in extended families and helped each other make the American dream a reality. My grandparents and parents grew up in that tradition, and we try to create that sense of family here. Most of our residents are functionally illiterate, unskilled, have been addicted for at least ten years and have been in and out of prison four times. I have no idea what causes drug addiction, and it doesn't really matter. Whatever it is, you still have to live your life without drugs, with dignity, and make your life work for you. Delancey Street teaches people to be responsible; it is not a program for sick people who need to be taken care of."

Residents are required to earn a high school equivalency certificate; they study civics, literature, art appreciation, and music, and learn three marketable skills. The days are rigorously structured, with vocational training in one of Delancey's numerous business operations, lunchtime seminars on current events and living skills, evening educational classes, special

tutoring, and group sessions. Reflecting the hierarchy of a family, more senior residents have greater responsibilities and privileges, but everyone is expected to contribute.

Delancey Street does not have paid staff. Residents teach what they have learned to newer arrivals, run the entire facility, and operate moneymaking training school businesses which include a print shop, bakery, restaurant, automotive service center, moving company, and Christmas-tree lots. "When our training schools are doing well, we all eat steak," Silbert says, "when they're not, we eat beans. But we know we're in it together for the good times and the bad."

The Delancey Street buildings, a \$30 million residential and commercial complex completed in 1990, took five years to build. To get the project started, the Bank of America, which is headquartered in San Francisco, gave a \$10 million unsecured loan, and local building unions provided free training. Constructed almost entirely by the residents themselves, the buildings capture the spirit of Delancey. "We didn't have \$30 million, but we had faith that we could make the impossible happen," Silbert recalls. "We learned what we had to know, and in the process, our three hundred residents became expert builders. If a wall was put up badly, we tore it down and started again. We managed to complete the whole project for \$14 million, and we're already paying back our bank loans."

The majority of Delancey's residents are referred by the courts; about a third walk in off the street seeking help. A screening committee of senior residents decides who can stay. Because space is limited, half the applicants are turned away. The minimum period of residence is two years, but many stay twice that long. A few have been at Delancey for eight to ten years. The dropout rate is low—about 22 percent—and half of those who leave eventually ask to return.

Silbert does not conduct follow-up studies but stays in touch

with the majority of graduates. "Whether they're doing drugs or committing crimes is too narrow a measure; the more important question is whether they've changed their interaction with society," she points out. Graduates provide a network of friendship, jobs, and opportunities for each other after they leave Delancey. Some of the graduates have gone on to become stockbrokers, lawyers, real estate agents, and San Francisco city officials, including a deputy sheriff and a deputy coroner.¹⁹



At dinner time, Delancey's dining room looks like an ad for Ivy League college living, the men in ties and jackets, the women in skirts. They eat at candle-lit tables set with silver and napkins, discussing the events of the day.

Karl T., a former drug addict in his early thirties, explains that learning how to relate socially is a new experience for many residents. "Out on the streets, none of us ever really talked. We shouted and fought and cursed but we didn't know how to be friendly," he remembers. Karl spent eight years at San Quentin for killing an enemy gang member, much of the time in solitary confinement. When he came to Delancey on parole, he was completely illiterate. "I had my initials tattooed over my thumb so I could copy them. Now I teach reading and writing to the new residents," he says with pride.

Mario A., who knew Karl at San Quentin, has lived at Delancey Street for three years. He has earned his high school equivalency degree and last month successfully completed his parole. When he leaves Delancey, he plans to work in an auto repair shop in Oakland owned by two Delancey graduates.

"I started using heroin when I was thirteen; my dad gave it to me," Mario recalls. "We were in the same gang;

everyone did drugs, I thought it was normal. Like killing guys from other gangs. I never got caught for that, like Karl did. But I got sent up twice to San Quentin for bank robbery. I still used drugs inside. I hated the place—it made the barrio in East Los Angeles seem safe. I'd heard about Delancey Street and when my time was up, I got paroled here. This is the first real thing I've ever been in. It's like having friends and family who never quit on you, like Richard here who just would not let go, no matter how crazy I felt."

Richard P., a former cocaine dealer and drug addict who has spent five out of the past ten years in prison, laughs and puts his arm around Mario. "Man, you know we all know all the games, we can't con each other, we've all been there," Richard says. "On the street, I had friends, but only when I had money or dope. We were always waiting for someone to score. Everyone I ever trusted let me down, so I shut that part of me down. But here I found out we can be different. We're responsible for each other, so I can't run away."

"Delancey helps you grow up," Karl adds. "Whenever I've wanted to split, I look at what we've built—the walls I put up brick by brick—and the people I'm teaching who are counting on me, and I realize I can't run away."



Mimi Silbert is the heart and spirit of Delancey Street, which is clearly her life's work. She raised two sons there who still consider Delancey Street home. She has opened additional Delancey centers in upstate New York, New Mexico, and Santa Monica, California, with about one thousand residents nationwide.

Replicating the program without someone as dedicated and charismatic as Silbert would be difficult, but key aspects of

Delancey's philosophy are more widely applicable. Delancey's emphasis on self-sufficiency, responsibility, and accountability are frequently found in effective treatment programs. So, too, are the strong group support and familylike nurturing. But Delancey also achieves practical learning in technical, educational, and social skills so that graduates have a real opportunity to build successful lives. Even seemingly small details, like learning how to choose clothes and order meals in restaurants, increase residents' confidence in their ability to function in society. The network that graduates create by opening doors for one another accelerates their progress and sustains them against the hopelessness which Silbert believes underlies drug addiction and crime.