

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Sunday, September 20, 1992

In San Francisco, ex-felons serve meals instead of time

By Jane Meredith Adams

SPECIAL TO THE INQUIRER

SAN FRANCISCO - The waiters, waitresses, busboys and chefs at the Delancey Street Restaurant here have accumulated a lot of knowledge: how to steal, prostitute, deal drugs and do time in the state penitentiary.

But, in a series of dramatic social makeovers, these hard-core ex-felons and ex-drug addicts have transformed themselves into fresh-faced individuals who graciously serve cucumber sandwiches and salmon mousse in a restaurant they also built.

The restaurant is the latest venture of the Delancey Street Foundation, a 21-year-old residential self-help program that accepts no government funding and instead supports itself through its own businesses and private donations. The foundation, which houses 500 residents in San Francisco and operates on a multimillion-dollar budget, imparts middle-class attitudes about work, speech and dress to people the rest of society has abandoned.

"Everybody here is just like me — drug users, people who have been in the criminal world most of their lives," says chef Robert Smittle, 43, who came to Delancey Street on a work-release program in lieu of serving an eight-year prison sentence for armed robbery and kidnapping.

"We're tired of that lifestyle, the running and the drugs and the hurting people. We want to change."

The change is so convincing that patrons sometimes find it difficult to believe that their charming waiter or waitress is actually a Delancey Street resident.

"They'll give you the look — really?" said Donnese Brown, 24, who came to Delancey Street three years ago after hitting bottom in a drug house. "I told this lady I'd been a prostitute since the

age of 12. She said 'No!' If she'd seen me before, she would have believed it."

The best standards are expected at the restaurant, from the white table cloths to the fanned arrangement of the grilled chicken on an afternoon High Tea plate. Residents largely built the restaurant themselves, learning how to hammer and weld from union workers who donated their time. The airy restaurant is not in a rundown neighborhood, but on the waterfront with a stunning view of the Bay Bridge.

"We've proved that the absolute worst of the population is capable of the absolute best of what's possible in our society," said Delancey Street president Mimi Silbert.

In a time of despair about the seemingly intractable nature of urban poverty and unemployment, an issue brought into focus by the Los Angeles riots, Silbert and Delancey Street model offered a proven program for change.

"It's a model that doesn't require experts and doesn't require lots of funding," she said. Instead, the people society thinks are the problem can provide the solution, she said.

"It's a great program," Judge Lenard Louie, presiding criminal division judge in Superior Court in San Francisco, said of the Delancey Street Foundation. "From my experience, the success rate is high. I don't see them back in my court as a whole."

In response to the riots, Silbert for the first time is beginning to lead seminars to teach the theory and practice of life at Delancey Street, which operates at the San Francisco residence and houses an additional 400 residents in smaller programs at San Juan Pueblo, N.M.; Brewster, N.Y.; and Greens-boro, N.C. Thirty

people were trained in July in San Francisco; another session is scheduled for this month.

"We are besieged," she said. "We've had 15,000 letters from people asking to learn how to adapt the model."

Typical of the Delancey Street success stories is that of Julio Aguirre, 28 who had never held a job for more than a few weeks before coming to Delancey Street two years ago. Since age 12, he had been in and out of juvenile halls and prison. When he faced a 16-year sentence for burglary and other offenses, he asked Delancey Street if he could join its program.

Now he is a fry cook at the restaurant, training under some of the best chefs in the city, if not the country. "I like working in the kitchen," Aguirre said. "You're rushed. Every day it's something new. You give it your all."

The Delancey Street model is hierarchical, with each resident entering on the bottom rung, usually starting with a job in maintenance. If successful at that, the resident is promoted and then becomes responsible for teaching someone else a task. Teaching and being responsible for another person are keys to the philosophy of the foundation.

Brown, the waitress, takes classes in computer programming at City College, then shares what she has learned by teaching a class to residents. "I'm getting straight A's at City College," she said. "This is major to me."

Residents must stay two years, but



Delancey Street residents who work at the restaurant present a convincing picture of change. The program's success rate is high.

the average stay is four. It is not hard to see why.

The residence is a waterfront Mediterranean-style apartment complex that includes a movie theater, a swimming pool, a Jacuzzi and the restaurant; a bronze sculpture donated by Southwestern artist R.C. Gorman decorates the courtyard.

Residents pay no fee for living there. The foundation is supported by income from a moving company, an annual Christmas tree sale, a marketing company, a print and copy shop, a catering service and the restaurant. Everyone must earn a high school equivalency diploma and learn physical labor, computer or clerical skills and how to work with people.

As part of their socialization, residents are outfitted with new, donated clothing. They are given haircuts and

told that "ain't" isn't proper grammar. They work their way from living in a dorm room to a private room in a two-bedroom apartment worth \$2,000 a month on the market.

It is a way of life different from what most of them have known. Silbert compares the residents to immigrants of another time, the men and women who helped each other when they arrived in America and settled on Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of New York.

This is a one-in-a-million chance for a guy like me the get his life together," said Smittle, the chef.

"I'm not interested in a great deal of money anymore," he said. "It used to be important - money and fast cars. Now I'd like a nice trade, a clean place to live and to stay close to Delancey Street."



The Restaurant, built by residents, is Delancey Street's latest funding source and training ground.