SECOND CHANCES

The Miracle Of Delancey Street
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Miracles are Tough to Come by—
Mimi Silbert’s Delancey Street
Offers Hardened Criminals
the Opportunity to
Turn Their Lives Around.

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Photography by John Chater

On a one-block stretch of prime San Francisco waterfront, 500 hardened ex-cons and ex-drug addicts serve
fine food to restaurant customers,
drive moving vans, talk sales over
the phone and run a variety of departments at a
thriving commercial center. They also enjoy
evenings at the theater and afternoons in the
Jacuzzi, and on special occasions there are
dinners or dances to celebrate ethnic holidays.
This is Delancey Street, the toughest alternative
to the California prison system.

At its helm is Mimi Silbert—a woman
who has been called “the Mother Theresa of
America’s down-and-out.” Her story is about
caring—caring for the losers of society when
they hardly care for themselves—caring so much
that she invites people who have “hit
down-the-road-bottom” to lift themselves up
by the bootstraps and learn to feel again. She’s
talking about hardened street thugs, on their
way to doing time in prison, or just out of
prison, people with records of murder or arson
or robbery, addicted to heroin or crack or
alcohol, who have done “every disgusting thing
you can imagine” and find themselves at the end
of their rope. Silbert does not offer them a cold
government program with base bones food and
board, and a staff of professionals “breathing
don their necks.”

Delancey Street is a beautiful place.
Four levels of apartments and shops are
interspersed with open, tiled courtyards and
stairsways throughout. The atmosphere is serene.
Balconies with flower boxes line the apartment
units and there is a running fountain. Anyone
would feel proud to live there.

However, there is a catch. If you
come to Delancey Street, you must be prepared
to give it your best shot. If you leave, you
won’t be invited back.

Silbert’s empire governs itself. Unequally, it earns its own money (it accepts no
government grants) and each resident is
responsible for teaching the newest members
what they know until all residents have three
marketable skills and enough self-confidence
to make it in society. It is a hand-meadow system
that belies any program that claims you need to
hire a lot of experts and spend a lot of money
to get results.
I came here and...I was terrified. Everyone was polite, and normal, and had clear eyes.

I looked around and wondered.

So where are all the drug addicts?

When you're a drug addict you wake up every day and your first thought is, "How can I get the money?" You don't think about anything else. It's like a black hole, a tunnel of darkness that you can't see the end of. You just keep going down, deeper and deeper, until you hit rock bottom.

I sold my soul to the devil and he gave me drugs. I started with cigarettes, then moved on to heroin, and finally ended up with crack.

I looked at my reflection in the mirror and saw a stranger. I didn't recognize the person staring back at me. I was a drug addict, and I was losing control.

I used to be a good person. I had a family, I had friends, I had a job. But drugs changed everything. They took away my dignity, my pride, my self-respect.

I used to think that I was invincible, that I could handle anything. But the day came when I realized that I couldn't. I was addicted to drugs, and I didn't know how to stop.

I tried to quit, but it was like trying to stop a car going 100 miles per hour. It was impossible. I had to get help, or else I would die.

I went to a rehab center, and it was the best decision I ever made. I learned how to control my cravings, how to navigate the world without drugs. It was hard, but I did it.

I'm still not cured, but I'm getting better. I'm learning how to live my life without drugs, and I'm grateful for every day. I'm a drug survivor, and I'm proud of who I am.
At the Delancey Street Restaurant a resident brings Minn Libbert a cup of herbal tea and whispers something in her ear. She beams and laughs and thanks the waiter by name. Her face reflects joy and enthusiasm, and when she speaks, her raspy voice gains intensity.

"When you come into a place like Delancey Street, a little piece of you really wants to change, but a large piece of you tells yourself 'naw!' This is built-it. It’s gonna be the same as everything else! Nothing works..."

"And then you have to give up everything that you instinctively know—all that self-destructive behavior that leads to nothing but failure. These are people who are comfortable in that cycle. It’s the only one they know. And they come here, and we ask them to trust..." (she pauses to emphasize the importance of the word "trust") "that doing it all differently will somehow put together the life that you want. It takes tremendous courage to get yourself to believe, to hope, to accept all those attitudes, to put to be on good, to trust people, to trust that you can be trustworthy when you never have been! All of that is incredibly difficult...and we demand it nonetheless...and it’s exciting when people do it!"

When Libbert proposed Delancey Street, the idea was unpopular and controversial, and Libbert herself did not know for sure if it would work. But she fought through miles of city and state legislation that "absolutely prohibited" such an exploit, and when Willie Brown finally gave her special dispensation after three years of red tape and lengthy petitions, she personally "measured the dirt," developed, and constructed the Delancey Street project, without a cent of government money, using only the labor of the ex-cons themselves, who were guided by a few professional contractors.

The facilities function like any private company, except for the constant flow of residents in training. There is an auto shop, a moving company, an espresso cafe, a restaurant and retail shop, and the building is equipped with large rooms which are rented out to customers for such things as banquet halls and meetings. Residents start their time at Delancey Street with a job on maintenance, and move up in the hierarchy of work, going to dishwashing, cooking or administrative duties as the need requires. The clothes the residents wear are donated, and the meals are served in a large, tastefully furnished cafeteria that is as neat as a pin.

"One of the hardest things about running Delancey Street is being realistic about who comes in the door. Because some of the people are at their worst. And you really have to be tough enough to meet that head on and not let them manipulate you and make excuses...Part of my job is to close all the gaps that would allow them to manipulate their way through. And simultaneously, I have to look them in the eye and see who they are and see that they can become. That balance is a really hard thing to do being both hard and soft; both tough and naive."

Libbert says that Delancey Street was modeled after her "extended family" from the ghettos of Boston. Her immigrant relatives and poor neighbors "banded together and took care of each other, because together we would make it up into the mainstream of America." Libbert, who has her double doctorates in Criminology and Psychology from UC Berkeley, made it out of the ghettos.

"But as the years went by, I began to see people who didn’t get out of the ghetto, and who by a hair’s turn, ended up in prison."

At 42, Shirley Lamm walks with quick, determined steps and speaks emphatically about a life that was "like living in hell." She is not shy, and tells it like it is. "You can take me from the year’s years of my life, and I wouldn’t be bothered. Except the three years I’ve been at Delancey Street. You can’t take those. Those are the only years I’ve known happiness."

Shirley says her mother was "one of them women who really shouldn’t have any kids, but she did." An alcoholic who physically abused Shirley and her three siblings, she was "a pretty woman who soon found out that men would pay for her favors." She would leave the children at various relatives’ homes and disappear sometimes for months. Shirley adopted the role of mother to the younger ones (who were "trick babies") from the age of 10, neglecting school work to take care of them. During the times her mother had them at home, Shirley says she was "like a young sister struggling to make his way in life."

"I had no idea how to be a wife. No idea how to be a mother...I certainly didn’t learn from my mother. We were two kids. We didn’t know what the f-- we was doin’. Half the year we was on welfare, and somehow, well, this was really not how I dreamed life would be. You know, I’d watch TV, and I’d see these perfect families on the TV, and I’d say ‘What the f--? Why ain’t my life like that?’"

Shirley worked two minimum wage jobs to stay afloat, "dropping" babies and white to stay awake. She went through several relationships, none of which was stable enough to allow her to settle; and when she "went whole hog" with drugs while hanging out at the speakeasies in Oakland, she passed her four children from her husband to numerous relatives, in obvious mimicry of her mother’s behavior.

"I remember always wanting to have something, and wanting to be something, but I didn’t have a clue as to how to go about that. I was trying...but I just didn’t have the right basics. When I moved to Oakland and got a job, two of my sisters come to live with me, ‘cause they’re out of school...and now I’m responsible for six people’s lives. I was only 20. I’d never played in a playground or gone to no junior prom."

While working her first decent job,
Shirley met a man over the phone, and liked his voice and his conversation. After two weeks of flirting with each other by phone, she decided to go out with him.

"When he opened the door, everything inside me told me to turn and run. Well, I didn't run. It was like I was on a suicide mission. Something destructive inside of me thought I was gonna take this mother f— and turn him around."

From there she started using on an everyday basis and when she lost her apartment from spending rent money on dope, she went straight to the streets and Poochie, her boyfriend, became her pimp.

"I knew it was bad...but there was nothing in me to stop it. I assumed that it was just meant to be...That I was meant to be a hooker, because I had tried to get my life together, and it didn't work. I was livin' in the pits of hell—a full blown prostitute and junkie workin' on who's stro' (whore stroll), where my kids saw me when they drove by with Poochie."

Shirley cries while she talks, and wipes her face with her hands. "Every night, it was mechanical, I went to get the money to get the fix. And I knew that any night that I stepped out on that street corner, it could be my last. But it didn't matter."

She recalls through more tears that after eight years of prostitution she felt herself going crazy. One night, after being verbally and physically beaten down by Poochie, she shot him in the face with a gun from a distance of three or four feet. Poochie survived, the bullet passed through his nose and lodged in his jaw bone. Poochie would not press charges, so she was not incarcerated. She went back to the streets without Poochie and remained there until she was 39.

"By now, both my oldest son and my oldest daughter ran the streets with me...we done burglarized, me and my daughter, we done turned tricks together, we done shot dope together, smoked crack...you name it, me and my two oldest kids did it together. What the f— you know? When I got picked up for burglary... basically I was glad to be in jail...to rest. And then I'd be goin' to prison, and that was okay, 'cause I knew I'd be all right in prison."

Her relationship with the police, who most of the hookers knew pretty well, was comfortable. One of the police gave her the number of Delancey Street, and she wrote them a letter and asked for an interview. Louise Lickerman interviewed Shirley.

"My first intention was to learn somethin' to get a job. But I had no idea how to live life. All I knew was how to sleeze up to a man. Once you take off the bottom half of my body, I ain't worth s—. That's how I felt about myself. But I learned how to speak, how to act, how to carry myself like a lady."

"And they told me, 'Okay, now, go help her!' And I said, 'What do you mean, go help her? What can I tell these women? I'm a prostitute! I'm a junkie! What is it that I can tell them?' And they said, 'You can tell them how not to become one. Tell them what it feels like.' So I did. And when you become a role model, that's when you feel best about yourself."

Shirley received her GED in her second year at Delancey Street. She would like to go to college and eventually "work in politics on the outer edge" to help people like herself. At present she works full-time as an administrative assistant for Silbert in the head office. She hopes that one day her two elder children, still in the streets, will follow her example and join her at Delancey Street.

There are four existing Delancey Streets across the nation: in Brewster, NY, near Santa Fe, NM, in Greensboro, NC, and the San Francisco headquarters. Silbert is in the process of buying a building in Los Angeles for its fifth location. Of the approximately 1,000 members, 500 reside in San Francisco. One-third of all of the residents are women. "We've reached a stage where clearly the process of Delancey Street works," Silbert says, finishing her tea. "There could be people in all of our facilities who could be violent, ripping each other off, committing crimes...because there's no one watching over them with any real authority—there are no guns, none of the controls that exist in prisons—and yet we have the same population as most prisons. But there are no arrests, and no crimes..."

Silbert has a collection of over 10,000 letters from groups of people, governors and legislators, asking for help to model their own places after Delancey Street. She has turned them all down, because she doesn't have time to oversee any more projects. She has agreed, however, to begin a training institute to teach people how to run such an organization.

"I don't even know myself if it's teachable—how to have an organization that comes from your belly. I mean this is in my belly! And it comes from the bellies of the people who live here. You feel it, as well as know it."

Silbert believes that prisons are necessary, but should be a short transitory punishment. "Once you spend too long in prison," she says, "it becomes a lifestyle." She vociferously opposes the death penalty, calling it "gang-like retribution," and points out that the success rate at Delancey Street is over 90 percent.

"Human life is redeemable. You're always gonna trip; you're always gonna fall somewhere; you're always gonna need people. That's human. I'm human too."

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Mimi Silbert