Delancey Street Rehab Center to Open in L.A.

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If Mimi Silbert were to run a classified ad for her new Los Angeles venture, it might read, "Wanted: A few bad men and women."

Silbert is the head of San Francisco's acclaimed Delancey Street Foundation, an enterprise grounded in the principle that drug addicts and ex-convicts can turn their lives around if they want to. The foundation bought the defunct Midtown Hilton on Vermont Avenue near the Hollywood Freeway earlier this year and will reopen it today as Delancey Street Los Angeles.

The average Delancey Street resident has had 12 years of hard-core drug addiction, has been in and out of prison four times, is functionally illiterate, unskilled, and has never worked at even an unskilled job for more than six months. "People who have become involved with gangs, drugs, violence, crime... those are our favorite residents," Silbert said.

It is the dramatic turnaround of such individuals that has won the praise of law enforcement officials, civic leaders and medical authorities.

Silbert predicted that the new Los Angeles home will fill up with as many as 500 residents, making it comparable in size to the San Francisco operation. The foundation's three other operations—outside Santa Fe, N.M., in Brewster, N.Y., and Greensboro, N.C.—are also busy, Silbert said.

The program's flagship operation is a complex of apartments, restaurants and shops on San Francisco's waterfront—a facility built by the program's residents. Like much of what Delancey Street does, the complex was built with land provided by the local redevelopment agency, donated materials, and assistance from bankers who took a chance on the program.

As an institution, they say Delancey House fills a special niche. There are other successful drug abuse programs in California, but most charge fees or accept government funds. Some free programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, don't have schools or long-term residential setups. There are halfway houses for ex-convicts, but few with the intensive schooling, vocational training and exposure to cultural outlets that Delancey provides, according to experts.

"I'm very impressed with what they have been able to do," said Barry Nidorf, Los Angeles County's chief probation officer. "Starting with very little, they have been able to turn around a number of lives."

Andrew Mecca, the director of the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, said Delancey Street "absolutely exemplifies the very best of what we've learned about treatment, about what works and doesn't work. They take people who society has literally given up on and turn them into people who lead alcohol- and drug-free, productive and happy lives."

Wayne Clark, director of substance abuse services for the San Francisco Department of Public Health, said that even though his
The foundation had something of a false start in Santa Monica during the 1980s, when it operated out of temporary quarters, which included a house donated by actress Jane Fonda, and was unable to find anything it could afford in Los Angeles.

"I've been looking for property in Los Angeles for years and years and years," said Silbert, who lives with the other residents in the San Francisco complex. Silbert, who had been looking at various hotels and hospitals, said she knew the $7.5-million Midtown Hilton was ideal the moment she walked through the doors.

"It's huuuuuuuge," she exclaimed recently, showing off the Spanish-style hotel, which has a sloping lawn, gardens, and shaded walkways that give it a country club look. "It is just endless . . . it goes around and around. It has a pool, a Jacuzzi, a health club, some 200-odd rooms, two restaurants and, best of all for our catering business, a banquet room that seats 500.

This is a far cry from prison, as it should be, she says. She calls the traditional state prison approach "absurd."

"In prison, we, the taxpayers, pay people who are already irresponsible to stay irresponsible . . . We segregate them from society for a while, but we don't teach them anything, and when they come back they are even more irresponsible," she said.