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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."



Mimi Silbert of the Delancey Street Foundation is enthusiastic about opening a Los Angeles branch of the rehabilitation organization.

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

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agency does not officially monitor Delancey Street, he considered the program "a very strong and positive force in the community. . . . Clients who have not succeeded in our programs have done well in their programs."

Delancey Street's mission is to take people such as Robert Rocha, 27, and turn them into solid citizens.

Five years ago, fresh out of San Quentin, Rocha took the \$200 traveling money given to him by the state of California, scored some drugs in San Francisco and decided to deal. He found a mark, but instead of selling him drugs he decided to rob him instead.

The mark turned out to be an undercover cop, and Rocha was booked for assaulting a police officer, being under the influence and possessing drugs. As part of a plea bargain, Rocha was offered Delancey Street after serving time for his parole violation.

Rocha, an eighth-grade dropout, never knew his father, and shot up heroin with his gang-member mother, who is serving a 12-year sentence in state prison. "I started shooting heroin when I was 13. I was busted for armed robbery when I was 14. I had 27 armed robberies by the time I was 18 years old," Rocha said.

Today Rocha wears a tailored Ralph Lauren gabardine suit, has his hair neatly cut and speaks quietly and articulately. He has his high school equivalency degree and is attending community college.

The Delancey Street approach falls somewhere between the extremes of those who believe hardcore felons should be locked up for long periods and those who think they should be shown sensitivity and compassion because of hard-luck upbringing.

The program is built on the premise that the best person to turn around an ex-con is another ex-con. It has no traditional drug counselors or social workers on its staff, relying on the street smarts of the people who have already kicked their habits.

Sources for the foundation's support include a moving and trucking company, restaurants, catering businesses, marketing operations, automotive repair centers and Christmas tree lots. At the program's in-house school, residents can earn a high school equivalency degree or learn trades and discipline by working on various foundation projects or in its shops and restaurants. They get free room, board, clothing and other benefits, but receive no pay, other than "walking around" money.

Living at Delancey Street means observing many rules. Residents, who are asked to make a minimum two-year commitment to the program, are immediately thrown out if they commit or threaten physical violence or use drugs or alcohol. They are required to get at least a high school equivalency degree and learn three marketable job skills. Nearly all of them obtain a commercial driver's license so they can at least get jobs as truck drivers.

Aside from learning how to work, they are hammered with middle-class values. The men must wear a coat and tie to dinner, the women must wear dresses. "We take everybody to the museums; we take them to the operas. They don't have to like any of it, but they do have to know about it," Silbert said.

Silbert helped start Delancey Street with its founder and leader for many years, the late John Maher, and a few others in 1971. A 5-foot dynamo, Silbert, who holds doctoral degrees in criminology and psychology from UC Berkeley, has been running Delancey Street since 1985.

The foundation for years has played a role in San Francisco politics, providing volunteer support for various candidates. Local politicians, including U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), often put in public appearances at its housing complex. San Francisco County Supervisor Bill Maher, John Maher's brother, is a reformed drug addict and former Delancey Street resident.

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 huuuuge!" 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.