CRIME AND TRANSFORMATION

Delancey Street's Dr. Mimi Silbert offers an Alternative to Building a Prison State

In reaction to the continuous assault of images of violent crime on television and in newspapers, Americans in unprecedented numbers are crying out for, “get tough on crime” measures. Crime, according to current polls, is the nation’s number-one concern. In a wave of hysterical fear, citizens who are unwilling to pay for the cost of improving schools are voting to spend unbelievable amounts of money to build more prisons and increase prison terms.

Such a gulf of separation exists between the fearful public and its image of those who perpetrate crime, that the criminal is seen as beyond hope, beyond help. In contrast, Dr. Mimi Silbert, president of the Delancey Street Foundation, sees the situation of many criminals as similar to the residents of the Boston immigrant neighborhood she grew up in. They are people who have never learned how to live in the American system.

Cited as the most successful self-help organization in the nation, Delancey Street was named after the New York neighborhood where immigrant families at the turn of the century crowded together and helped each other move up to a better life. Delancey Street began in 1971 in San Francisco, when Silbert teamed up with ex-felon John Mahes, who introduced the idea of a rehabilitation program run “by ex-cons, for ex-cons.” The concept was that addicts and ex-cons are best equipped to understand the experience and see through the excuses of those in similar positions.

From its beginning, Delancey Street has operated without public assistance or professional staff. A variety of businesses have been created at Delancey Street over the years to support the organization and provide opportunities for residents to learn marketable skills. Today Delancey Street nets over $6 million from businesses that include Christmas tree sales, moving and hauling, furniture design, printing, and catering.

In 1989, Delancey Street opened its new headquarters at the Embarcadero Triangle on San Francisco’s waterfront. Ninety percent of the construction work on this magnificent Italian-style 350,000 square-foot structure was done by Delancey Street residents with help and instruction from members of local

INTERVIEW BY JULIE FRETZIN

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One unique feature of Delaney Street, that makes it so hard to replicate, is that you have to be willing to completely take a risk on the people who are the problem, to make them the solution. And we do that on one hundred percent. Our residents typically have everything wrong with them. They’ve literally failed at everything. They’re violent. They’ve been victims of child abuse. Most of them have been in jail a good part of their lives. They’re in prison time after time. But the idea is to truly live together like an extended family, with kind of support and discipline that will teach us all the things we need to do to make it. There is no solution but our own people. Occasionally someone comes in and tutors a class or helps us buy the right kind of lettuce for the restaurant, but for the most part, it’s set up so that the residents do it themselves. People just have to stretch beyond anything anybody ever thought they were capable of doing.

Another important aspect of Delaney Street is that, although we’re a self-help organization, our real focus is on learning to help someone else. Our organization is based on the concept of “each one teach one.” People learn to be givers and doers rather than receivers. As soon as you learn something, you have to teach it. As soon as someone comes in who is newer than you, you have to help that person. All the rest of us are just at higher points on this mountain that we’re all trying to climb. And I’m always trying to explain to our residents that, once we’re all holding hands, climbing this mountain, it doesn’t really matter where you are. The person at the top may keep tugging to pull us up, but if people further down keep tugging down, we all go down. So we’re all focused on the newest person.

Stephanie, what was your experience when you first came to Delaney Street?

Muller: When I came here I was twenty-seven years old and I’d been shooting dope off and on for seventeen years. I was kicked out of school when I was fourteen. I’d never had a job, never applied for a job, never completed. I’ve spent my whole life living with drug dealers. But I was so tired by the time I got here. I was looking for a way out. But I thought, “Oh, you have to be weird to clean up.”

Then I came to Delaney Street and it seemed so straightforward and so honest and clean. There weren’t a lot of people who had done exactly what I was doing, who wouldn’t let me get away with anything. They’d never say, “Oh, poor bastard, it’s okay that you’re stealing everything in sight.” They were very straightforward. They said, “Why are you doing that? You can find here to change that.” And it was the first time that I saw a chance to get out of the place I was in. I didn’t have to do it all myself. I never thought I could do it. I never thought you can do anything, but you don’t have a chance to stop and think. It happens so fast. When someone asks you to do something you’ve never done before, you don’t have time to say, “I can’t do it.” You just say, “Okay. So I have stayed way beyond the period that most people spend here. It’s just something that makes me so excited—to be able to help other people learn what I learned. There are possibly ten other people here who have stayed on as long as I have. Almost everybody else has been here five years or less. Delaney Street really is set up for people to graduate. It’s sort of a cross between a large extended family and a university.

How has the philosophy of Delaney Street evolved as the program has grown?

Muller: The philosophy, remarkably, has stayed exactly the same from the minute it opened. The difference now is that we’re into the second or third generation of drug addicts/violent people. Whereas twenty years ago a lot of our people had parents who were working people, now their parents are dope fiends and in prison, and sometimes their grandparents are in prison. That’s a major change among the people. It takes a lot longer to peel away the layers and find out what kind of little person is there.

Muller: The general public would rather see these people packed up for the rest of their lives. But I entered as a prison psychologist, and it was clear to me that this system of punishment doesn’t work. The people who wind up in prison are given everything, all paid for by the taxpayer, and they’re responsible for nothing. And then we wonder why, when they come out, they’re no different.

This is why we decided to move ahead with our Training Institute. Such a cluster of horrors are happening to people at the bottom of our society, that it’s no longer right not to try to make it possible to dupli-
cates what we do here on a large scale. So the Training Institute is our newest, most exciting child.

How did you go about launching the Training Institute?

Muller: We had received over ten thousand letters from people all over the world who wanted us to start a Delancy Street in their community, because we weren’t able to hire people or buy property in other places, we thought the best idea would be to bring people here to learn all the psychological underpinnings of Delancy Street, the different structures, how we set it up. We sort of emerge them into day-to-day life at Delancy Street, explaining it as we go along. We don’t set up any kind of false group sessions or mock classes. People participate in whatever we’re doing to begin with, the different training schools that the residents go to, the encounter sessions that they attend. We explain what’s happening as we go along. People in the Training Institute eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with the residents. They live in dorm situations. In this way, people absorb what it is that we do and apply it to what they’re already doing. We sometimes keep in contact and give advice.

How do you communicate the intangible aspects of what goes on here?

Muller: The basic concepts that Delancy Street is based on—ethics and morals and integrity and commitment—these things take time to learn. And you learn them by living them. That’s why Delancy Street is long term. You can’t buy these concepts. You can’t learn them on a video. It takes living it. People want a quick fix. They say, “If we build a great big, pretty building like this, will it cure people?” Well, no, it won’t. It involves commitment, and it involves making people accountable for things.

What is involved in building the trust that enables people to change?

Silbert: It’s not that things are not difficult at Delancy Street. It’s not that you don’t get treated every five minutes. You do, because that’s what our residents are best at doing. But I have seen this unbelievable courage in our people in the face of all odds against them. When you’re self-destructive, it’s obsessive. It’s compulsive. It talks to you all the time. It tells you, “Don’t go for this, don’t do that. This is bullshit.” Everything inside them is telling them, “Go to the left, go to the left, go to the left.” And I stand there and I say, “Trust me, Come to the right.” And they don’t know how to do it. They feel stupid and awkward; they feel like they’re going to lose everything if they give up the only world they know. They’re never going to be able to make it in the other world. And then they’ll have no world.

Imagine a forty-year-old person who has killed a few people and had a few people killed and just been nothing but destructive his whole life. He’s evil incarnate, and in his mind everyone else is, too. And you see that person in front of you just slowly get wide-eyed like a child and begin to believe, begin to trust, begin to feel. This certainly takes well over a year. It takes well over a couple of years for that first real, decent feeling to come. But little miracles like that happen to people every day here. And to me, that is the thing I am so in love with that no matter how hard it gets—and it gets bad—I just keep coming back for more.

Do you believe that the principles that work at Delancy Street can be applied more broadly in our society?

Silbert: Absolutely. They are the principles that our country was supposed to be about. It was supposed to be a society that understood the idea of doing things for the public good. I have a doctorate in criminology, and I have no idea what causes crime or what causes addiction, but I do know that, whatever it is that life has dealt you, you’ve got to take it and make your life work well so that you can live with yourself and move civilization forward.

But the country is getting worse in my opinion. The whole country has become so cynical and self-centered as Delancy Street residents are when they come in.

The same concepts that we work with here can be applied to any population, the idea of people supporting one another, but not supporting each other’s craziness. Self-destruction by its nature is self-centered. It goes in the wrong direction. We work with people at the absolute bottom, and if our people can break through, I really believe that anybody and everybody can.

Julie Feinman is the Marketing Director of Friends of Creation Spirituality.

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