



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 Maher, 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



trade unions. Five hundred residents live in the 177 apartments arranged in a complex which is designed to resemble a college campus. Additionally, five hundred residents live in the four other Delancey Street facilities that have been established in Los Angeles; Brewster, New York; Greensboro, North Carolina; and San Juan Pueblo, New Mexico.

The success of Delancey Street has created an enormous demand for similar programs in other areas throughout the world. In response, Delancey Street has developed a Training Institute so that the valuable lessons learned from their experience can be passed on. In the elegant but cozy Delancey Street Restaurant, which is run by the residents, I interviewed Mimi Silbert along with resident Stephanie Muller, who supervises the Training Institute.

Mimi, what originally led you to

Photographs of Delancey Street headquarters by Judy Lepire. She can be reached at 510.548.0670.

get involved in this kind of work?

Silbert: The people here feel to me like the people I grew up with. I have always felt like, with just a quick flip of the penny, they could be me. I know this sounds crazy, but I like the energy of criminals. They do everything backwards, but I always thought, "What if we could flip that energy totally around?" You see, these people haven't given up. Or rather, their version of giving up is not to die, but to keep clawing and spitting and being destructive and self-destructive and violent. But still, they keep coming. And it just seemed to me that if you could take that and turn it in the opposite direction, there would be such a potential life-force.

When I left my old neighborhood, I didn't leave behind my liking for poor, trapped, angry people. I had many versions of how I thought I wanted to turn that energy around. At first, I thought I was going to teach English because reading

authors like Dostoyevsky just made me so much stronger and more committed. And I was convinced that if I could just get the right books to people, I could make a difference. I spent a semester trying to teach, and I found out it just doesn't work that way. It was probably a silly notion anyway. But now, we teach those things at Delancey Street.

What do you feel are the most important ingredients in making the Delancey Street program work?

Silbert: One unique feature of Delancey 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 one hundred per-

cent. 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 gangs. They've been in prison time after time. But the idea is to truly live together like an extended family, with the kind of support and discipline that will teach us everything we need to know 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 Delancey Street is that, although we're a self-help organization, our real focus is more 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 up, but if people further down keep tugging down, we all go down. So we're always focused on the newest people.

Stephanie, what was your experience when you first came to Delancey 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 considered working legally. I'd 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 Delancey Street and it seemed just so straightforward and so honest and blunt. There were 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 boobey, it's okay that you're stealing everything in sight." They were very straightforward. They said, "Why are you doing that? You came 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. You never think you can do anything, but you don't have a chance to stop and think here. 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 my life so exciting—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. Delancey 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 Delancey 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 addict/violent prison 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 in there.

Silbert: The general public would rather see these people locked up for the rest of their lives. But I interned 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-



cate 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 Delancey 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 Delancey Street, the different structures, how we set it up. We sort of submerge them into day-to-day life at Delancey 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 Delancey 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 Delancey 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 Delancey Street. It's not that you don't get betrayed 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 bad it gets—and it gets bad—I just keep coming back for more.

Do you believe that the principles that work at Delancey 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 an iota.

But the country is getting worse in my opinion. The whole country has become as cynical and self-centered as the Delancey 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 Fretzin is the Marketing Director of Friends of Creation Spirituality.

ORIGINAL ART

Walking through a field
Stoney, studdly, dry,
Saw....
A flint, sheered plain across,
Embedded, dirt encrusted.
Stooped, dislodged,
held, spat,
Cleaned that earthy surface.
Saw....
heaving molten rock
And a sky torn
by thunderbolts.
In the flint
a hologram of its own birth.

—Grace Blindell creates and writes poetry in Chesham, England.

"It's the Imagination that gives shape to the Universe." BARRY LOPEZ

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