

## HEROES

# Delancey Street: Where drug addicts, criminals, and the homeless go to turn their lives around.



Today, these very same people are vital, productive members of society. They have learned to read and have acquired all sorts of skills; they attend college and are part of the work force; they are raising healthy families. They are clean, they are sober, they are reborn. And each and every one of them has the extraordinary Mimi Silbert to thank for changing their lives.

Silbert is the cofounder of Delancey Street Foundation, a San Francisco-based self-help organization that rehabilitates the reprobates, the discards, and the lost souls by placing them in a family-like environment and teaching them to care for themselves, to care for each other, and to care for the community. The psychiatrist Karl Menninger has called Delancey Street, "the best and most successful rehabilitation program in the world."

"I know that you can teach people to turn their lives around," says Silbert. "Our assumption is that you can learn academics, you can learn vocational skills, you can learn integrity, you can learn values, you can learn things people

think you can't learn. You don't realize how many things are handed down through the family. It's an informal process of learning, and if it hasn't been handed down, you haven't learned it. The people who come to Delancey Street have no idea how to live. So we teach them everything—hygiene, how to dress, how to set a table, how to behave."

Since 1971, more than 12,000 people have successfully been through the Delancey Street program, where the average stay is four years. In addition to the San Francisco location, there are four other facilities around the country, with a total current population of about 2,000. The program has a remarkably low dropout rate of 20 percent, even though it is partial to some of the worst elements in society. "I'm always comparing Delancey Street to Harvard," says Silbert. "They're very snooty about taking the top two percent, and we're

Mimi Silbert has an extended family of more than 12,000. For most of their lives, these people represented this nation's worst nightmares: repeat criminals (with an average of 18 felony convictions), hard-core drug addicts, prostitutes, the unskilled, the functionally illiterate, the homeless.

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Silbert is a diminutive dynamo, the kind of woman who achieves whatever she sets out to do and doesn't take no for an answer. She is passionate, boisterous, and frequently speaks in exclamation points. "Mimi really cares, and it shows," says Gerald Miller, a resident of Delancey Street for the past six years. "When we come to Delancey Street, we're pretty good at picking up frauds and fakes, because we've dealt with frauds and fakes all our lives. And you can tell that she's the real thing."

Spending even just a few hours with Silbert at Delancey Street is a moving experience. One comes away inspired by her energy, her commitment, and her deep concern, and touched by the dignity of the people participating in the program. To those on the outside looking in, the success of Delancey Street appears to be just this side of a miracle. But Silbert, a down-to-earth, practical dreamer, would

undoubtedly demur. To her the results are the logical outcome of a program that combines education, family values—in the truest sense of the term—and common sense.

"I started Delancey Street with an ex-con, an eighth-grade dropout who had been through the justice system," says Silbert. "Although we were coming from different perspectives, we simultaneously came to the conclusion that we have an entire system that isn't working. And we thought, 'Let's pretend that nothing exists and create what common sense—which is in short supply everywhere—would dictate.' And that's what we did. We made the decision to function as a family, because no matter what shape they're in, families persevere and find new ways to regenerate. In a family, people take care of each other."

Since 1991 Delancey Street has been headquartered in a splendid residential and commercial complex situated on prime waterfront property overlooking the San Francisco Bay Bridge. It is home to 500 people and a fine restaurant, also called Delancey Street, that is run and staffed entirely by residents. The sprawling structure was built by participants in Delancey Street, with minimal outside professional help. "When we started we had five people who knew anything at all about construction," says Silbert. "We trained over 300 people in the building trades, and a bunch of us wound up with contractor's licenses."

**A**t Delancey Street, everyone helps everyone else, and everyone teaches everyone else. Everyone has a job to do, and the structure is hierarchical: Newcomers start with the most menial jobs, and the more they prove themselves, the more responsibility they're given. "Upward mobility is critical to the organization," says Silbert. There is no staff; Silbert, with a Ph.D in criminology and psychology, is the only professional involved. "Everyone gets tutored to a high-school equivalency. As soon as you can read at the eighth-grade level, you're tutoring someone who's at the sixth-grade level, who's tutoring somebody else. It cycles down, and it all goes to the principle that you learn by teaching, that you change by helping."

People wishing to participate in Delancey Street must apply to the organization, which relies on word of mouth and



(Top to bottom) Silbert tastes recipes at the Delancey Street restaurant; waiter-residents sing "Happy Birthday" to diners; the foundation's moving company.

never approaches anyone. "I know that when these people come here they're not motivated to change," says Silbert. "But we put a step in that says, 'You have to ask to come here.' Because you have to take responsibility for your life. They have to ask for help, and promise to stay two years. We know they don't have any intention of keeping that promise. We know they think they'll get healthy, get some clothes, and then go out and do what they've always done. When they come here their goal is to manipulate. And our goal is to manipulate them, to keep them so busy that they don't think about leaving. Everything is geared to get you through the minute. And then the next minute. And then you've stayed a month. And once you've stayed a month, you think, 'What the hell, another month.'"

Gerald Miller can testify to the accuracy of Silbert's words. Distinguished looking, impeccably dressed, and possessed of a beautiful speaking voice, Miller is a former heroin addict who was in and out of jail for robbery and other crimes, hard as that is to believe today. "I had a choice of going back to jail for 16 years or coming here for two years," says Miller, who is currently a college student. "I still had a couple of brain cells bouncing around, so I chose Delancey Street...When I came here I didn't have a clue how to tie a tie or set a table, because I never had to do those things. The more I learned, the more I realized how little I knew. After you're here for 15 or 16 months, you wake up one day and realize you're out of your mind if you don't straighten up, because you'll spend the rest of your life in jail."

**S**ilbert, 55, was born in Boston and spent her formative years in a neighborhood she describes as a ghetto. "We lived in a small flat in an area that pretty much *was* Delancey Street," she says. "It was a very close neighborhood of poor people, Jewish immigrants and blacks. We were a classic immigrant family. My grandparents lived with us, and so did aunts, uncles, and cousins as they came into the country. I grew up in an underdog mentality, which happens when people have escaped from pogroms and Germany and concentration camps."

When she was 12, Silbert's family moved to a nicer neighborhood. "We moved up," she says. "That's what we

were supposed to do. That was part of the American Dream." She attended the University of Massachusetts as an undergraduate, and received a master's degree and Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. "I had a life that was rolling along. But as I got older, I found out how many people don't have parents that adore each other and adore you. I saw some horrible things, and I was overwhelmed with guilt. I had the kind of life where it was easy to achieve, while other people were working harder just to get through the day. It was really out of balance, and I had to fix things to make them right. The concept of getting to those less fortunate was *always* there. It's what I was good at. As far as I can remember, I was always the person that everybody called with their problems. My job was to mediate and solve them. And to this day it's never crossed my mind to do otherwise."

It was while she was working as a therapist and teaching that she made a discovery that helped focus her thinking. "Whenever I'd finish a session people would say to me, 'Thank you so much, you've changed my life,'" says Silbert. "And I realized that the people who feel

teaching criminology at Berkeley, and together they founded Delancey Street. He also helped raise her twin sons from an early marriage. Maher died in 1988, but the program he and Silbert established runs today precisely the way it did at the beginning, only on a much larger scale.

**E**conomically and socially, Delancey Street is similar to a kibbutz. The organization receives no government funding; it is entirely self-sufficient. Everyone involved lives there and works in the restaurant or at one of the foundation's other enterprises, including a moving company and a Christmas tree business. "I raised my kids at Delancey Street," says Silbert, "and I follow all the rules." All income is pooled; no one draws a salary. "Programs have annual budgets, but we don't. Some years we make more money, some years we make less."

Delancey Street offers proof that teaching a sense of self-worth and responsibility can transform lives. "We now have second-generation criminals," says Silbert. "So you can't just throw away the adults and think you're gonna change the kids. The kids worship the adults. You

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good in life are not the people who have to say thank you to everybody, but the people who are thanked. And from that I understood that what we needed for criminals was an educational model, not a therapeutic model." She explains. "It is all of the things you *do*, not the things that are done *to* you, that enable you to grow..."

Silbert doesn't think most of the people Delancey Street serves are sick: "They've been dealt an unfair deck, and they've got to be taught how to play a great hand."

That same idea had occurred to John Maher, the ex-con who would become her partner personally and professionally. He contacted Silbert while she was

have to break the cycle by turning them around. It's not easy. The answer doesn't come in a cute sound bite; you can't just say no to drugs. It's a much longer answer. It's the same answer for anyone who's attempting to turn their life around from the things that are making it self-destructive. It's a long answer, but it's a possible answer. It's not even a costly answer. But we have to have leaders willing to say, 'We don't have to make excuses for these people. What they did is their fault. But we also can't throw them away, because it won't change their children. We simply must teach them.'" ●

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*Sheryl Flatow is a San Francisco-based writer who contributes frequently to this magazine.*