A second chance
On Delancey Street

In the serene area of the Delancey Street compound, John Singh, rear, the administrative director of Delancey Street Foundation, and Alcalde operations manager Steve Mack pause by a German sculpture to pet Mickey.

Marianna Garcia has learned to care for and help people.
ALCALDE — When Marianna Garcia arrived at the front gate of the Delancey Street Foundation last year, she removed her Rolex watch and fat diamond ring — luxury items she earned selling drugs and robbing banks — and handed them to her companion.

It was a good move, because soon her hands would be shriveled from dishwater.

Washing dishes is a punishment for breaking the rules at Delancey Street, a private organization that for 26 years has helped ex-cons, drug addicts and the homeless put their lives in order.

For Garcia, shedding a few pieces of jewelry, it turned out, was a lot easier than dropping her attitude, the rock-hard shell that had formed after 24 years in California and New Mexico prisons.

"If they told me to go left, I wanted to know why I couldn't go right," she says. "I've done more dishes than any person in this house."

But she stuck it out, though at the time she wasn't quite sure why.

Eighteen months later, she knows why: For the first time in decades, she cares. Not just about herself, but others.

"I noticed a change when I began feeling confused," she says. "In prison, you learn not to care about the person next to you — your reputation is what's most important — and suddenly I started seeing people and understanding what they were going through. I didn't have the answers, but I started going up to them and saying, 'I'm here to help.'"

Now Garcia, 47, is in charge of the new women arrivals, and she watches them make the same mistakes. Now she gives out dish duty.

"I see the new girls and they use every excuse I used to use, and I say, 'Yeah right.' But you have to let them bang their heads on the wall, you have to let them make mistakes and work their way up.

"In prison, you earn your reputation. Here, you earn respect, and more importantly, self respect."

Garcia's story is one shared by thousands of past and present Delancey Street residents. About 12,000 men and women have passed through the program since Mimi Silbert founded it in 1971 in San Francisco. Silbert claims that about 90 percent have gone on to live productive lives.

Today, Delancey houses about 1,000 members, 500 in San Francisco, and the rest at facilities in Brewster, N.Y., Greensboro, N.C., Los Angeles and here in Alcalde, about 8 miles north of Española.

Unlike other treatment and rehabilitation centers, Delancey Street has no professional staff. Here, residents work with each other in a tightly structured, work-intensive environment, guided by older residents who supervise the facilities.

The key, Silbert says, is starting from the bottom.

"We take the approach that these are people who don't know anything," says Silbert, 55, a former prison worker who holds a doctorate in criminology and psychology. "We're not just talking a poverty of money, but of skills and values. Our goal is to teach them everything — academics, vocational skills, attitudes, values, responsibility, accountability, caring about your community — and our hope is, in the process, they will turn their lives around and help the society around them."

On a cool clear fall day, John Singh walks past the beautiful and peaceful Swan Lake.
New arrivals at the Foundation are called immigrants, because this is all about starting fresh. The grounds are pristine. The 17-acre Alcalde facility was once known as Swan Lake Ranch, a retreat for movie stars and Wall Street brokers before being abandoned in the late 1960s. Silbert bought and refurbished the property, which is on San Juan Pueblo land, in 1977. Now, it's a refuge for the destitute.

It resembles a lush Spanish villa, with ivy-lined courtyards, stables, a large dining hall and outdoor patios. At the center is a small lake, from which the property gets its name, surrounded by a stone walkway and willow trees.

In fact, all Delancey locations are remarkably lavish for rehabilitation centers. The San Francisco headquarters fill a 370,000-square-foot, four-story building along the city's Embarcadero with a view of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. The New York facility is built on a 92-acre ranch with a Tudor-style mansion at the center.

"Setting is a big part of it," says Alcalde operations manager Steve Mack, a former cocaine addict, as he walks past a pair of horses grazing on the softball field. "If you're going to treat an alcoholic, you're not going to treat him in a bar. A lot of these people have never seen places like this."

The Foundation takes its name from the street in New York's Lower East Side which, at the turn of the century, came to symbolize the self-reliance of Old World immigrants who worked and earned their way into mainstream American life.

"The immigrants on Delancey Street had a goal of everybody helps each other," Silbert says. "The whole neighborhood worked together to fulfill their dreams. And it worked, they worked their way up and out, and that's what we're trying to do, work our way up and into middle-class America."

For most, the day begins at 6 a.m. Residents wake up and shower in dorms they share with at least eight other members. The kitchen crew, meanwhile, is already busy preparing breakfast for Alcalde's 106 residents.

By 8 a.m., landscaping crews are combing the manicured grounds with rakes, while other crews clean windows and mop floors. These are the new residents. At Delancey Street, you start at the bottom.

"We all start there," says John Singh, the administrative director in Alcalde. "And we have to work our way up."

Silbert boasts that, except for the Alcalde center, the facilities are self-sufficient and accept no taxpayer money. Alcalde has from the beginning received some money from the Corrections Department in exchange for beds.

The department sometimes offers Delancey Street as a sentencing alternative.

The rest of the money comes from donations and income from Delancey's numerous businesses, which range from retail sales and catering to a moving company.

The Alcalde center's sprawling business complex — a two-story adobe that stretches the length of two football fields — houses everything from its furniture showroom to an auto shop.

Residents make almost everything the foundation sells: custom furniture, upholstery, ceramic chile pots and seed jars, sand paintings, bark planters, picture frames and small wood and glass terrariums that are used as candy jars. Most of the goods are sold through telemarketing and in Santa Fe-area shops.

The San Francisco facility has a first-class restaurant run by residents, a printing firm and is putting the finishing touches on a combination art gallery, bookstore and cafe.

As residents advance in the program, they move from grunt work to the shops or sales and administrative offices, where they often learn new, marketable skills.

"When I came here I didn't know anything about wood," says George Macias, 44, taking a break from creating a custom carved Spanish door. "I didn't know what sawdust was."
The Santa Barbara, Calif., native had spent much of his life in and out of prison for selling drugs before he came to Delancey. Now he deals with the public to build and sell custom furniture. He says it has not only taught him about woodworking but how to control his emotions and to communicate.

"When I came to Delancey I didn't speak to anyone, I didn't have a character," he says. "They stripped me down and built me back up. I was just a little kid when I came in here, even though I was old, and it took me a while to understand that. This isn't just about building furniture, it's about saving lives."

Residents are required to give a two-year commitment before they're accepted at Delancey but can quit at any time. Some do.

"If somebody doesn't want to be here, please go, we need the bed space," Mack says. "But if you're serious and you want to change, this is an opportunity."

The first three months are the most difficult, say Singh and Mack. New residents often have a hard time adjusting to the rigorous work load, especially repetitive tasks that seem unnecessary, like mopping the same floor over and over. The idea is to keep people too busy to think about drugs or crime.

Some people also resent taking orders from residents who are younger but have been there longer.

"It was real irritating," Garcia says of her early days. "But you have to learn to handle the little things before you move on to the big things."

The first six months, residents aren't even allowed to walk the grounds unless accompanied by a more experienced resident. Singh says it's a measure to prevent theft and other crimes.

"It's just a matter of watching your back. You have to remember the kind of people you're dealing with."

Singh knows. He was one of them. He came to Delancey in 1988 "just to get my parents off my back. I'd been drinking, doing drugs, running the streets, those things."

He left two years later, older but not wiser. Soon he was back to his old ways, and this time he was arrested for commercial burglary.

"That's some of the stupid things you do when you're drinking," says Singh, 36.

He returned to Delancey and this time the program worked. Six years later, Singh runs the entire facility's finances and administration — skills he learned here.

"I was lucky, they let me back in," he says. "That's what so unique about this place, we've all been there."

Residents range from ages 18 to 65. There are about equal numbers of Anglos, blacks and Hispanics. About 25 percent are women. Sex offenders are the only people denied entry. And only three things are not tolerated and will get you expelled: violence, threats of violence, or drug or alcohol use.

Residents graduate after two years, but many choose to remain. The average stay is 3 years to 5 years, but graduates can stay as long as they want. Some have been here 25 years.

The work day usually ends around 4:30 p.m. But this time of year many residents put in 14-hour to 18-hour days preparing for the Foundation's big Christmas drive, when it makes most of its money selling Christmas trees and retail sales.

After work, residents attend several meetings, ranging from group encounters to gripe sessions. They also can attend a number of classes, including cooking, computers, creative writing and GED preparation. Outside activities include trips to concerts, Albuquerque Duke games and University of New Mexico football and basketball games. The Foundation also fields a regular softball team in the Greater Santa Fe Softball Association.

No one receives a salary, but after 18 months members get pocket money: $25 a month for non-smokers and $20 a month for smokers. The extra $5 is an incentive to give up the habit.

Residents shop for free clothes in either the men's or women's "boutique," — which is filled with donated new and used clothes — the way they might at J.C. Penney or Dillard's. The quality of clothes they can "buy" depends on how far they've progressed in the program.

Residents also can begin taking classes at local colleges after 18 months.

Frank Dietderich, 42, is working on his master's degree in education and counseling at The College of Santa Fe.
Dietderich had a promising future after graduating in political science from the University of California at Berkeley in 1981. But the cocaine and heroin habits he managed through college got the best of him afterward. Sitting in a California jail four years ago for armed robbery, a cellmate told him about Delancey Street. The cellmate had dropped out of Delancey, but told Dietderich, "If you can do it, it will change your life. If you don't, you can always come to work for me" selling drugs.

"I knew right then what my choices were," Dietderich says. "I knew I was going to Delancey."

Haddrill oversees all the women now. She's in charge of college marketing, medical services, catering and several other jobs. At Christmas time, she's in charge of soliciting donations of presents for the residents. Then, with a few other senior residents, she matches gifts as closely as she can to members' wish lists created weeks before. It's a special time for her.

"For me, it's more about watching people open gifts who've never had them before," she says.

In January, Haddrill will begin the exit stage — three months when residents look for jobs and begin preparing for the outside world. Members use this time to save a little money before they leave.

Haddrill is luckier than most, she already has her nursing license. But she's nervous because she knows finding work is only part of the battle for people leaving Delancey. The other part is staying clean.

"My mother's happy I came here," she says. "But I know when I'm out she'll be skeptical."

"If somebody doesn't want to be here, please go, we need the bed space, but if you're serious and you want to change, this is an opportunity."

STEVE MACK
Alcalde operations manager

I've been to so many treatment programs.

James Swanson, 41, knows what Haddrill's going through. He has been out for six weeks after spending three years in Delancey and years as a heroin addict. Like Haddrill and others who are ready to leave, Swanson was scared, but also confident he could make it. Before he left, he ran the furniture shop. Now he's making a life for himself in Española as a door maker.

"People like us have to remember where we came from and what put us there," he says. "But the biggest thing I learned after three years at Delancey was that I can be a decent person, too."

This will be Connie Haddrill's last Christmas here. One day three years ago, the Las Cruces native abandoned her apartment and career as a registered nurse to go to Delancey. She had relapsed into a years-long cocaine addiction.

"It was either come here that day or die," she says. "I had never been arrested or gone to prison, but I hit rock bottom."

Photos by Clyde Mueller / The New Mexican

A couple of residents walk down the hall of the Warehouse. The buddy system is one of the rules at Delancey Street. "The two buddies look out for each other and help keep each other out of trouble, especially during times of weakness," Steve Mack says.
Immigrant work ethic

Mimi Silbert grew up in a large, Eastern European immigrant family in Brookline, Mass., helping her father in a corner pharmacy. She could have never guessed her experiences there would lead to a lifetime of working with ex-cons, drug addicts and prostitutes.

"(The Delancey Street Foundation) is an attempt to put together the two frameworks that I have known in my life, which were schools and my life growing up in a poor immigrant family," said the organization's 55-year-old founder and president.

"We all lived together, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and everyone had their noses in everyone else's business," she said. "And with the parents all out working, the kids learned to take care of each other."

Those are lessons she has tried to pass on to Delancey Street, where being alone and minding your own business are discouraged.

Silbert went on to earn her doctorate in criminology and psychology at the University of California at Berkeley.

Silbert soon became a consultant for prison systems nationwide.

In the early 1970s, a man described as a charming ex-con named John Maher, who was a graduate of the controversial Synanon drug-treatment program, contacted Silbert about a fledgling project he was developing in San Francisco to help ex-cons, drug addicts and prostitutes.

Maher had left Synanon because of its movement toward a more closed, cultish society. He wanted a program that would integrate people back into society. Maher and Silbert joined forces and were soon married. Maher died of a heart attack in 1988, but Silbert carried on the work.

Perhaps because of Maher's ties to Synanon, Delancey Street is sometimes associated with cults.

"I think the reason that there's sometimes that misperception is because we don't advertise, we're not like Charter Hills and those places, so people wonder who we are," says Steve Mack, operations manager at Delancey Street's Alcalde facility.

Delancey Street also doesn't recruit, people are free to leave the program at any time, and the treatment is free.

Plus, Silbert says Delancey Street is far removed from anything that might be termed "New Age."

"We're very old augey," she jokes. "We are as traditional as it comes. We've put together what I think is the best of the right wing conservatives, who believe in old fashioned accountability, and the best of the left, who believe in giving people a second chance."

By Ray Rivera