

THE REPORTER

WOMEN'S AMERICAN WAORT

SPRING 1997 VOL. 47 NO. 1

MIMI SILBERT

The Angel of Delancey Street

INSIDE

Ready To Mate; No Jewish Date
CAN PROGRAMMING FOR SINGLES SAVE THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

Politics And Promises
GOOD AND BAD NEWS FOR THE JEWISH AGENDA

Class Dismissed
WHY EDUCATION MUST HEAL RACISM

From Good To Gold
WAORT POLISHES ITS PRESIDENTS

THE REPORTER IS PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TRIPP REYNOLDS

THE ANGEL OF DELANCEY STREET

DR. MIMI SILBERT

Dr. Mimi Silbert is surrounded by ex-felons, drug addicts, gangsters and prostitutes, but she's so absorbed in what she's saying, gesticulating wildly with her hands, that she barely has time to sip her tea, let alone watch her back.

"Strong, fight, together," she motions with animated hand gestures, telling all at once the story of how the people bustling around the room, refilling tea cups and politely offering lemon wedges, have come from jail, from abusive homes, from gang wars, from getting loaded on the streets since they were 9, to the Delancey Street Foundation, where they have learned in just a few years to turn their lives around.

"These people are self-destructive, anti-social, unskilled, uneducated, illiterate — really failures, at school, family, everything," says Silbert, the five-foot-tall, slender dynamo with bright blue eyes who helped found this nonprofit self-help organization in 1972 with a few people and a few hundred dollars. "They can, without a lot of money, without professionals coming in to 'cure' them, come together and teach each other to make it."

And that is the true miracle of the Delancey Street Foundation — named after the heart of New York City's Lower East Side where Jewish immigrants once pooled resources to help one another rise out of poverty. It's not that legions of hardcore criminals are regularly morphed into upstanding citizens, although that is a feat no other rehabilitation center has managed with as much success — but that they do so on their own,



But as Silbert points out, "This is an against-all-odds place. Who would imagine that the people who are the problem could be the solution?"

She did. After earning doctoral degrees in psychology and criminology from the University of California-Berkeley, and after working as a prison psychologist and training police and probation officers, Silbert saw the cracks in the system. She compares it to a building with a flawed foundation. "You have no choice but to rebuild."

with no grants and no staff.

"We are governed by an 'each one teach one' principle, where taking care of each other replaces street wisdom," says Silbert, 54, breaking into another easy smile. "So as soon as you learn to set the table, you teach someone else." The principle reflects Maimonides' highest level of *tzedakah* — helping people help themselves.

There isn't one person in Mimi Silbert's life who didn't tell her she was crazy to start the Delancey Street Foundation, which she co-founded with her late husband, John Maher, a former heroin addict from the Bronx, and has run by herself since 1984.

BY AVIVA PATZ

'I kept saying I'd leave, but after a while, it struck a chord in me. I wanted to be somebody.'

— Abe Irizarry



And rebuild she did, drawing largely upon her own Jewish background. "I come from a close-knit family that was strong on values and support," says Silbert, who was raised in an immigrant neighborhood in Boston on Yiddish phrases and good Jewish cooking. "The Talmud teaches us that it's not our responsibility to complete the world, but that we must keep working on it.

"It also teaches, 'If not now, when?'"

So the angel of Delancey Street set out to find a way to release people from the vicious cycle of crime and poverty. "The biggest horror in America, this young country, this country of mobility, is that we have developed an underclass that isn't moving. You can separate the problems, but the underclass is stuck with all of them."

To help them realize the Delancey Street dream, really the American dream, Silbert and Maher followed an unlikely model, the State of Israel. "Like Israel, we are bringing people together to create an impossible dream," she says, remembering how she sat in the living room, staring at the radio, awaiting news on the status of Palestine. "The dream was palpable in my family — to fight for a homeland for people who had no home."

She quotes Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, saying, "If you will it, it is no dream."

Today, the Delancey Street Foundation is better than a dream. It supports 2000+ members at five national facilities: Brewster, N.Y., Greensboro, N.C., San Juan Pueblo, N.M., San Francisco and Los Angeles, Calif., and has earned Silbert numerous awards and commendations — the Mahatma Gandhi Humanitarian Award, the Jewish National Fund's Tree of Life Award, a Koret Foundation award that recently sent her to Israel, and an America's Award sponsored by the Positive Thinking Foundation, are but a few. In the last 20 years, San Francisco mayors have declared four "Mimi Silbert Days," and former San Francisco Police Chief Frank Jordan has said of Delancey Street, "It's the finest program I know for rebuilding lives." Three years ago, Silbert was approached by the Clinton administration for help in applying her strategy to the rest of the country.

Recognition is well-deserved. The Delancey Street Foundation has proven it can accomplish what other facilities — prison, in particular — cannot. The majority of residents have already served four or more jail terms by the time they reach Delancey Street. Some are sent to the program on parole, others on pro-

bation, and still others choose to go as an alternative to serving hard time. But Delancey Street is no walk through the park.

Some residents say it's tougher to get through this program than to live behind bars — and that's exactly why it works. "New residents long for prison, where virtually nothing is expected of them," Silbert wrote in a *New York Times* Op-Ed article in January 1994. "Prisoners are not required to work, confront their problems or change. Taxes pay for everything, drugs are easy to come by, and the daily routine can consist of watching television and pumping iron. Fights are considered normal."

On the other hand, according to Silbert, people at Delancey Street have to live cooperatively with others, learn to read, admit responsibility for the harm they've caused, earn their keep and make restitution to society. "The model is not angry or punitive toward the person, nor does it assume that this is a poor sick person who has no choice," she says. "People can learn. And it's our job to teach them."

Residents take the first positive step toward reform before they walk in the door. They have to submit a written request for acceptance into Delancey Street, pass an interview conducted by a panel of residents, and promise to remain in the program, nonviolent and drug-free, for at least two years. The first step is always the hardest.



'You could have put me on Mars, it wouldn't have made a difference. I would've figured out how to destroy myself.'

— Gregory, resident

"Our people are comfortable in a world of drugs, hate and failure, and they bring that with them even though they know it's self-destructive," says Silbert. She believes some of the best remedies come from workaday tasks as simple as sweeping.

"You'll have a new person say, 'I got the crappy broom, that's why I did a bad job.' But c'mon," Silbert says to the person, "You've been doing this your whole life. You've got to learn to work with what you've got, to work with one another." They live a life of looking for other people to blame.

Which is why the program starts by teaching basic personal responsibility. Residents are assigned to a dorm, and a dorm head, someone who's been there about a month or so, gives them all the rules: get up in the morning, make your bed, do your dorm duties, take a shower.

In a full 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday, residents toil in the foundation's onsite restaurant or print shop, operate the biggest

moving business in the city, or work in catering, auto repair and construction — businesses that net more than \$6 million for Delancey Street annually. Then they settle down to study. A person who reads at a 10th grade level will tutor someone who reads at an eighth grade level and so on. Everyone earns a high school equivalency, and is trained in three marketable skills — a physical labor skill, a people-to-people skill (waitperson or sales) and a clerical skill (accounting, bookkeeping).

The program also fosters a sense of community. Residents are assigned to a unit of 10 people called a *Minyan*, (after the Jewish prayer quorum), which can be comprised of such strange bedfellows as white Aryan skinheads, black gangsters and poor Hispanic prostitutes — all of whom start out angry and hating each other.

“But one tiny piece of them wants to change, or they wouldn’t have chosen to come here,” Silbert says, “so it’s up to the 10 of them to help each other turn that little bit of hope into real hope.”

Foundation residents in San Francisco did come together in 1990 to build an impressive facility along the Embarcadero waterfront, a three-story, three-acre complex with a heated pool, screening room, auditorium, Mediterranean-style courtyard, upscale restaurant and garden. They’re currently adding a coffee house to the facility, which has been assessed at \$300 million. They built it for half that amount.

Success stories abound. Without one incident of violence, 12,000 people — of whom one quarter are women, half are minorities, most have used heroin for more than 10 years and are illiterate, and all have dabbled in serious crimes from car theft to armed robbery to murder — have completed the full four-year program and gone on to become real estate agents, doctors, lawyers, accountants, legal secretaries, mechanics and even a deputy sheriff. One man earned a medical degree and then opened a practice in the rural south, where he had once picked cotton for minimum wage.

The most moving stories for Silbert, however, are those “where you know the person had given up on everything. This person is so nasty and slimy and you think, ‘Maybe we’ll teach him one skill, but he’ll always be a jerk.’ Then you see them start caring about other people before thinking of themselves.

“The most wonderful moments of humanity come from the people who had given up on themselves. And then I think, ‘Oh God, this is what it’s all about.’” ♦



TRESS FOR SUCCESS: HAIRDRESSING STUDENTS AT ORT Kfar SABA PRACTICE THEIR TECHNIQUE ON ONE ANOTHER

“Almost Last Chance”

Ask Riki Biro where her students would be without their school and she answers perfunctorily: “On the streets. On the streets or working 10 to 12 hours a day for the rest of their lives.”

She should know. As principal of ORT Kfar Saba, an “almost last chance” high school north of Tel Aviv in Israel, Biro and her staff help hundreds of troubled teens grow gradually into responsible, professional Israeli citizens.

“They have so many problems — personal, economic, learning disabilities, dyslexia,” says Biro. “We are trying to teach them to be a person and to accept things, to have obligations, like going to the army, like taking the *Bagrut* [matriculation exams required of high school graduates in Israel].”

At ORT Kfar Saba, which is supported by funds from Women’s American ORT, students in grades 9 through 12 congregate in small classes to prepare for the *Bagrut*, and to learn a vocational skill: hairdressing, makeup, carpentry, secretarial skills or graphic design.

Their biggest lesson, however, may be in self-esteem. Whether it is because they come from economically deprived homes, dysfunctional families, or because they suffer from illness, students tend to exhibit the same symptoms: withdrawal and indifference, sometimes aggressive or criminal behavior. Israel’s mainstream schools have closed their doors to them. “They are so disappointed from experiences at other schools that they don’t believe in themselves,” Biro says of the students, some of whom arrive unable to read or write. “They don’t believe that they can learn, that they can make something of themselves. We say we will help them, but on one condition: they have to want it.”

ORT Kfar Saba was founded in 1967 for a few dozen young factory workers who were left unemployed by a recession in Israel. According to Yehuda Segal, the school’s principal for nearly 30 years, “They were roaming the streets, antagonistic and resentful, candidates for crime. Initially we planned to keep them for one or two years, but they were so motivated that they didn’t want to leave.”

Today, ORT Kfar Saba is a fully accredited four-year high school with 246 students, and growing. Eighty five to 90 percent of them graduate each year, and receive a government certificate from the Ministry of Labor that enables them to open their own business. Segal has said employers wait in line to hire students from ORT Kfar Saba, which has become a national model for similar endeavors.

“We give them the opportunity to be a citizen of Israel,” says Biro. “We want them to be somebody and to be proud.” — AP