

Solutions Elsewhere

By Gil Griffin, STAFF WRITER

SAN FRANCISCO – Suddenly, the lunch crowd inside the elegant dining room seemed to lose its appetite. The spectacular view of San Francisco Bay outside the windows seemed to disappear.

Those gathered grimaced as if pained and let out a collective groan of "Oooooooh" when they learned the lunchtime seminar's topic: The "Three Strikes and You're Out" law.

The 1994 California measure—in which criminals with a history of serious crimes automatically face 25 years to life in prison for a third offense—affected everyone in the dining room.

All are convicted drug offenders or recovering drug addicts. They all live at Delancey Street, a privately run, residential facility, and are taking steps to turn their lives around.

Many already have one or two strikes against them since the law was enacted.

"Let's take this time to reflect on who we are and why we're here," said Ben Allen, the leader of the forum, to his fellow residents, urging them to speak. "Talk about the things you'd like to do."

Resident Ronnie Tiger rose. "The law's not going to change," Tiger said. "But we can change ourselves."

Delancey

Rehab center focus is productive citizen

Passers-by who don't know about Delancey Street are convinced that the property – a four-story complex that resembles a Mediterranean villa – is an upscale condominium.

They're disappointed when they learn they can't buy property there.

In reality, this complex, located along the waterfront of San Francisco's China Basin, encompasses dormitories where about 500 men and women live, a restaurant where many of the residents work and

Lives broken by drug abuse are made whole again at Delancey Street



During a light moment at a daily lunchtime seminar, Delancey Street resident Carol Jones brought laughter to her comrades.

Committed to CHANGE

several business training schools, where the residents are assigned.

No bars on windows, barbed-wire fences, or guard towers here.

To be admitted to Delancey Street, hopefuls must apply by writing letters that show a commitment to change their lives, successfully completing an interview with a resident leader and, if currently behind bars, getting a judge's approval to enter.

The Delancey Street Foundation has been in existence for 28 years and was founded by Mimi Silbert, 56, who describes the residence as "a university for the bottom 2 percent of society."

It was her work as a correctional treatment specialist at Lorton Prison and Youth Center in Lorton, Va.,

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in the late 1960s that inspired Silbert to want to rehabilitate convicted criminals.

Hearing the loud, haunting sound of the closing gates behind her when she left the facility each day made her physically ill.

"The day I walked out and didn't get sick to my stomach, I knew

something was wrong," she said.

"I thought I had started thinking of 'We vs. Them.' That's a dangerous way of thinking. It behooves us all to keep the doors of society open. When some people come here, they can't even lift their heads up to look at you. Inside, they hate themselves. I see who they are and I see who they can become."

The foundation operates the San Francisco residence and others in Los Angeles; Brewster, N.Y.; Charlotte, N.C.; and one near Santa Fe, N.M., with a total of about 2,000 residents. More than 12,000 people have "graduated" from Delancey Street, which doesn't get a penny of government or taxpayer money. From the furniture inside the buildings to the clothes the residents wear, everything is donated.

There are no private sector or government social workers here either. No professional career counselors, consultants or instructors. The residents train and manage each other, with the veterans passing on knowledge to newcomers.

The basic rules are: no violence, no threats of violence, no alcohol and no illegal drugs.

Residents must commit to stay a minimum of two years, but most stay longer. There's no time limit on how long residents can stay at Delancey Street. Generally, they decide to leave when they feel they're ready to adjust to life outside of the facility. The goal is to transform residents into drug-free, productive members of society, who have several marketable job skills.

Silbert, whose parents emigrated from Eastern Europe, named the foundation and facilities "Delancey Street" after the bustling street on Manhattan's Lower East side, where emigrants from Poland, Russia, Ireland and Italy converged after their arrival in the late 19th century.

Delancey Street operates a restaurant, a moving business, a print shop, a Christmas tree retail service and other businesses that earn about \$10 million a year nationwide.

"We're a difficult organization to explain," said Gerald Miller, who, among his many responsibilities, conducts tours of Delancey Street



EDUARDO CONTRERAS/Union-Tribune

Each one, teach one: At Delancey Street business training schools, residents teach each other job skills. In the facility's garage, David Vargas, 40 (left) instructs Oscar Valenzuela, 24,

for visitors.

Twenty years ago, Miller wandered the streets of New York, hooked on heroin. He stole to finance his habit and was sent to prison.

Today, Miller, 42, is a Delancey Street resident and in recovery. He's taking courses at Golden Gate University.

A natty business suit covers his tall, slender frame. Only the accent in his articulate voice reveals anything about Miller's past.

"We don't say, 'You're a drug addict, we're here to fix you,'" Miller said.

"It's an each one, teach one approach."

That's been the philosophy under the leadership of Silbert, who has a joint doctorate in psychology and criminology and who has done case work in Lorton and San Quentin correctional facilities.

She is as resolute as she is optimistic. Silbert, who is a little more than 5 feet tall, strikes a commanding, yet warm-hearted presence and speaks as much with her facial expressions and body language as she does with her raspy voice.

Describing her as charismatic would be a tragic understatement.

"You see the people who are 'The Problem,' make the solutions," said Silbert, who lives at Delancey Street.

"They get the rewards. They get to move themselves up and think of themselves as givers and solvers.

People come here expecting to see maniacs and then they see us in our ties and our smiles."

In the beginning

The only gang you'll see at Delancey Street is the maintenance crew.

They're the newest residents. They dress identically and spend long hours every day doing manual labor, including sweeping and mopping the courtyards. When leaders determine that crew members are ready to enter one of the business training schools, they are relieved from maintenance duty.

"You always remember how long you were on maintenance, because you're always exhausted by the time you go to bed," said Kim DaRosa, a 28-year-old Delancey Street resident who grew up in Point Loma.

She spent 53 days on the maintenance crew after she was accepted at Delancey Street five years ago.

DaRosa said she started using marijuana and crystal methamphetamine in eighth grade, ran with a gang and eventually got kicked out of high school.

She tried three drug rehabilitation programs in San Diego but remained a user. She had never held a job and was facing the possibility of a seven-year prison sentence for burglary. Then, DaRosa read about Delancey Street, wrote an application letter and got court approval to

enroll.

After she was accepted and performed her maintenance duties, she was assigned to her first job, in food services. DaRosa said she'd never cooked for anyone but now had to prepare meals for 500 of her fellow residents.

Today, she helps run Delancey Street's accounting and catering departments. Last year, DaRosa was responsible for helping Delancey Street with one of its biggest endeavors, selling and delivering Christmas trees.

DaRosa is also taking courses at Golden Gate University. When she has time, she interviews Delancey Street candidates.

"I don't know why I acted out," DaRosa said, of her past.

"There's no way to say to your family you're sorry now for what you did. It's how you live your life now."

Ollie Wolfe, a 35-year-old, eight-year Delancey Street resident, also had a troubled past.

He grew up in Hunters Point, an impoverished community in southern San Francisco. Wolfe strayed from his Catholic school upbringing in his teens to abuse and sell marijuana and cocaine. He fathered two children, but wasn't helping raise them.

Wolfe was sent to prison and learned about Delancey Street from his sister, who was a resident from 1986 to 1990.

Today, Wolfe is a leader in one of Delancey Street's biggest enterprises, its moving company.

Wolfe supervises a crew of 85 movers and is certified with the California Motor Vehicle Department to train drivers for getting commercial licenses.

"I've learned a thousand skills at Delancey Street," Wolfe said.

"I've had to learn to be courteous and patient and I've done moves for the mayor, movie stars and politicians. As you stay here you get more responsibilities."

While there are no statistics on recidivism rates for Delancey Street graduates, Silbert said she knows of few cases of former residents returning to prison.

But some residents who backslide into drug abuse return to Delancey Street.

Charley Barancik, 49, returned to Delancey Street two years ago,

after spending 1985 to 1993 there. Each time he came, he wasn't in prison. He walked in off the street, trying to shake his heroin habit.

In his first stint at Delancey Street, Barancik said he enjoyed living there because it reminded him of the kibbutz in Israel he lived in when he was younger; it was a place where everyone was united and had a sense of purpose.

"I forgot some things I learned here," said Barancik, who keeps records for Delancey Street's automotive division.

"When I graduated, I hung around other people who were trying to do the right thing. But then I pulled back. Sometimes out there you can lose your purpose and get bored."

When Barancik came back to Delancey Street in 1997, he said Silbert looked at him and said, "Welcome home."

"I felt like a wayward son who had come back," Barancik said.

"I'm probably going to be here a long time."

Finding a home here

San Diego Superior Court Judge Norbert Ehrenfreund, a veteran of 24 years on the bench, has been a longtime admirer of Delancey Street.

Ehrenfreund, 77, has worked in criminal, family and juvenile court and doesn't think prisons help convert drug offenders into productive members of society. He thinks Delancey Street does and is working with Silbert to try to open a facility in San Diego.

Silbert has visited San Diego several times and has talked to city and county government officials about that possibility.

The biggest obstacle is finding a site.

An opportunity years ago to purchase a building in the Gaslamp Quarter fell through. Ehrenfreund said buying Naval land may work. "We have to take action other than just sending people away," said Ehrenfreund, who said he has sent 10 to 20 drug offenders to Delancey Street facilities.

"Prison doesn't stop them from using drugs when they get out. Delancey Street changes the directions of people's lives and shows them that they can be responsible

for themselves; that they can do a job and function. It gives them new mental and spiritual strength," Ehrenfreund said.

Over the years, Ehrenfreund has visited Delancey Street in San Francisco many times.

"I'm impressed by the way they live and how clean they are," Ehrenfreund said. "It's like a cleansing of their character."

Silbert said she sees Delancey Street as something tough enough on crime to please conservatives and rehabilitative enough to please progressives.

She welcomes comparisons to prisons, because that's when Silbert presents her strongest argument for the Delancey Street model.

"We could put people in a place where they have no responsibilities, they're with friends who have the same values, they have access to drugs and don't have to learn job skills," Silbert began. "And best of all, you get to pay for it."

"Or," Silbert continued, "Put people in a place where they change their values, do community service, learn to be responsible for themselves and others and have to learn job skills and you don't have to pay for it. When they come out, they're likely to be happy, productive, tax-paying citizens."

"Label the first choice 'A' and the second choice 'B.' Which would you choose?"

Solutions Elsewhere

► **THE PROBLEM:** Many drug addicts and convicted drug offenders returning to society lack marketable job skills, life skills and a sense of purpose.

► **A SOLUTION:** The Delancey Street Foundation, a private, San Francisco-based organization, operates residences with job training schools in five cities throughout the country, to help convicted drug offenders and drug addicts become drug-free, productive and responsible.

► **TO LEARN MORE:** Call the Delancey Street Foundation (415) 957-9800