

# School's main subject: Life

## Troubled kids learn academics by doing

By Julian Guthrie  
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

**S**YLVIA LACAYO PALACIOS was a quick study. Her mom did drugs; she became addicted by age 12. Her dad beat her mom; she socked her teachers. Her sister was gang banging; she joined in.

Falcon Harper was wildly energetic. Antsy sitting in a chair and listening to teachers, he devised ways out — of four middle schools in two years.

TeMon Howard was a smooth-talking self starter. He used scissors to steal cars, and became so adept at ripping off stereos that prices on the street dropped.

The teens possessed raw but critical life skills: attentiveness, verve, innovation. Yet, the good was used for a lot of bad. They were heading for grave, adult trouble.

Now, eight months after entering a 12-hour-a-day experimental school that opened on Treasure Island last fall, these teenagers are hardly model students. They have rage. They are scarred. But, for the first time in their lives, they have hope. And, they actually like school.

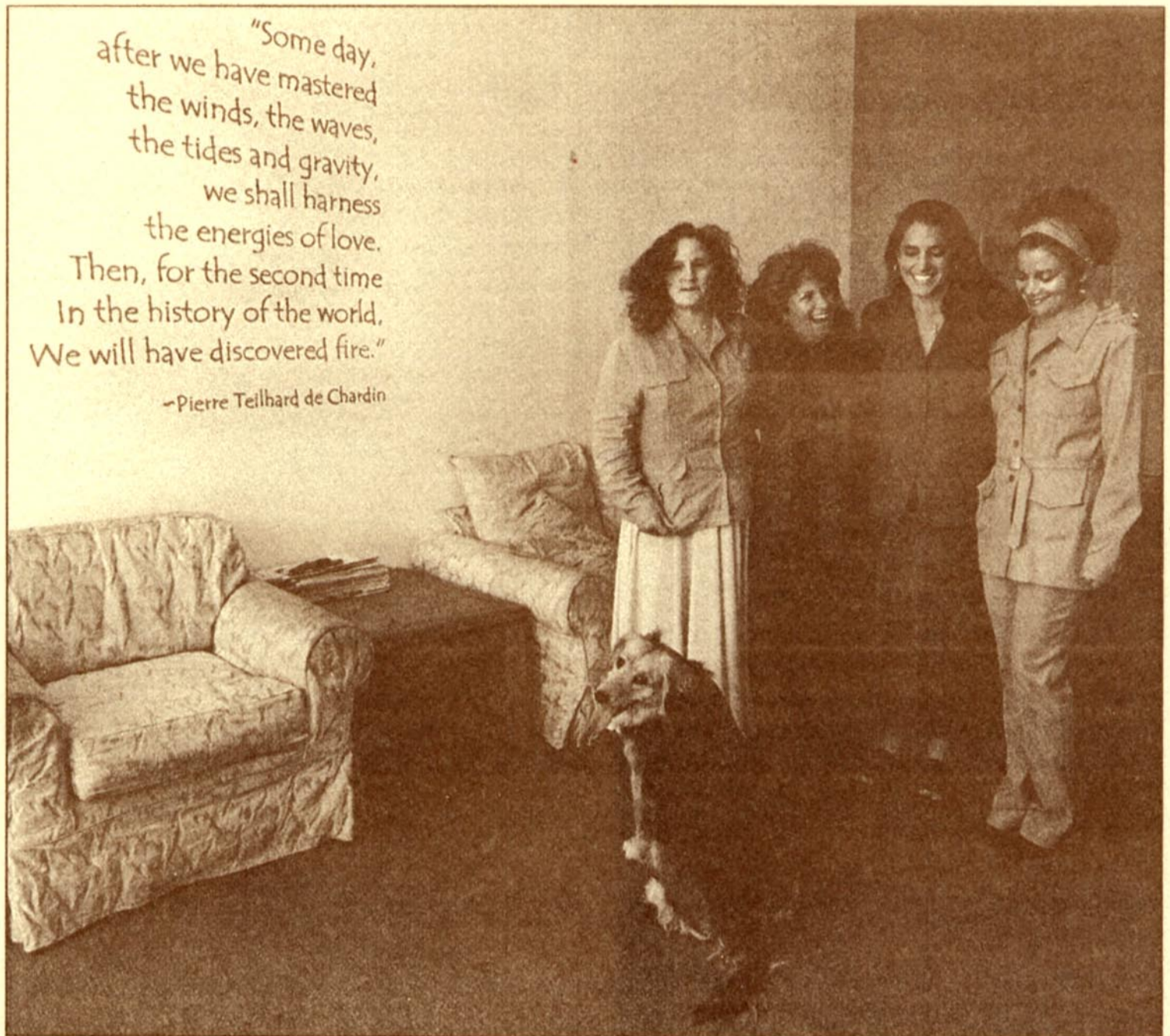
They are among 30 founding members of the Life Learning Academy, a charter school created by Mimi Silbert and based on Delancey Street, the famed self-help residential center she runs for former convicts, addicts and prostitutes.

The public school — kind of a Delancey Street for kids — enrolls teens who were referred by probation officers, the police, or other schools. All the students had either dropped out of school or were disruptive. Eighty-two percent said they used drugs or alcohol, and 70 percent had a close relative who'd served time or been arrested.

Richly funded by the state and

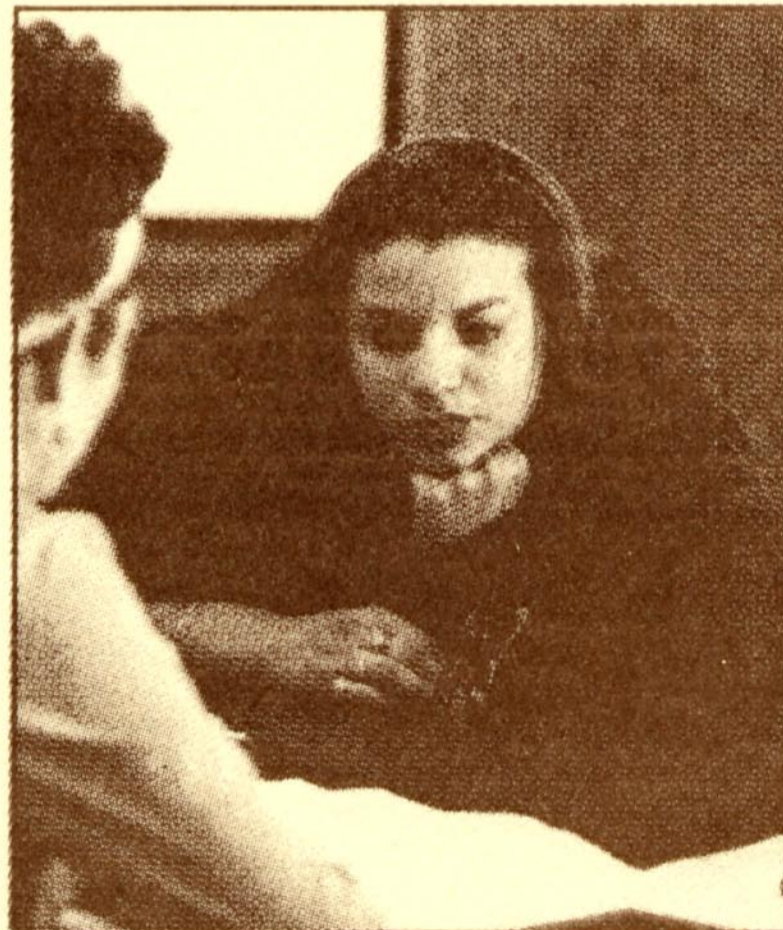
"Some day,  
after we have mastered  
the winds, the waves,  
the tides and gravity,  
we shall harness  
the energies of love.  
Then, for the second time  
in the history of the world,  
We will have discovered fire."

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin



In the Life Learning Academy lobby, from left: Principal Teri Delane, founder Mimi Silbert, English Department Chair Carol Chadroff and Joanne da Luz.

EXAMINER/BOB McLEOD



Sylvia Lacayo Palacios focuses on math with her teacher at the Life Learning Academy.

EXAMINER/BOB McLEOD

private foundations, the staff feeds, clothes, educates, entertains and disciplines its students during a school day that lasts virtually every waking moment. And their effort is being eyed nationwide as a model for how to help kids who have turned away from education.

"I think what Mimi is doing with Life Learning is perhaps the single most important social experiment there has been in this area," said U.S. Sen Dianne Feinstein, who had urged Silbert to open such a school.

Already, Mayor Jerry Brown of Oakland is urging Silbert to duplicate the school there. And leading education professors from universities such as Harvard have visited to look and learn.

What they see is a school like no other.



**From 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.**

Adult residents of the Delancey Foundation pick students up at 8 a.m. from their homes in Bayview-Hunters Point, Tenderloin and the Mission District, then drive them back home at 10 p.m. If necessary, the Delancey drivers will even get the kids out of bed and out the door. It works. Before enrolling at Life Learning, these students missed an average of 61 days of school each year — if they attended school at all. Since enrolling, the same students missed an average of two days.

Many of the students, ages 14 to 18, arrived at Life Learning unable to read and write. Their average grade point average was .5 — nearly straight F's.

Now they learn math through carpentry, and science through boat repair, sailing and gardening, among other things. And by the end of their first semester at Life Learning, their average GPA was 2.6, according to Silbert.

For kids like these, "The juvenile justice system usually becomes their education system," Silbert said. There are other schools for kids at risk of dropping out, she notes, but none for teens who already have dropped out.

"There aren't models that bring them back into the public school arena, keep them at home and keep them functioning," Silbert said.

**Bitter and violent**

Before the Life Learning Academy, there had never been anyone who looked at Sylvia Lacayo Palacios, 16, and saw good. In her young life, she had become bitter and violent, reflecting a world of drugs, gangs, abuse, a mom in and out of prison and a father who said she made him crazy.

Sylvia was passed from grade to grade without ever learning to read or write. At San Francisco's Mission High, which she attended for a year, she got all F's. When she asked the teachers about the

grades, they said wryly, "F is for fantastic."

"School was a joke," Sylvia said. "Now I like school and I want to learn. If it weren't for Mimi, I would probably be dead."

With the help of Delancey's adult residents, Sylvia and other students are building a new wing of the school and a nearby cafe, and learning math in the process.

The project-based curricula was created by Silbert — who has a doctorate in psychology and criminology — and a team of four teachers with degrees from Harvard, Yale, Stanford and UC-Berkeley. Through it, they hope to teach students such as Sylvia practical but sophisticated vocational skills — tools they'll need for jobs and independent lives. The cafe will open to the public and be operated by Delancey adults and Academy students.

To build the cafe and expand the school site, students are learning, for example, how to determine the amount of materials needed to build each room and project, from the lumber required, pounds of nails and amount of paint.



**TeMon Howard, 18,** gets picked up at his home at the Alice Griffith projects in Bayview by a Delancey Street van and taken to the Life Learning Academy on Treasure Island.

**'A handy girl'**

As Sylvia gives visitors a tour of the school, she proudly points out the walls, ceilings and floors she's built. "I was always a handy girl," she says, smiling. Walking from room to room, she struggles through "big words," such as "reception" area, repeating the word until she gets it right.

She has come a long way in eight months. Before, Sylvia says, she dreamed only of dope. Now, she sometimes sees herself as a construction manager.

"I'm changing but I still have these two sides," she said, looking to her left and right, as if an angel were perched on one shoulder and a devil on the other. "I used to steal everything. The other day, I went to Walgreens and bought lip liner. It felt so weird to be *buying* it."

Sylvia is one of three girls who have opted to live at the Academy, which has a small residential facility. Her home life was too insidious.

"I know how hard it is for these kids to change their lives," said school Principal Teri Delane. As a teenager, Delane was hooked on heroin and worked as a prostitute.



For the past 20 years, she has worked with Delancey Street, and earned a doctorate in psychology. "It's a lot easier for them to be back on the corner smoking weed and doing crack."

For TeMon Howard, who pleaded with a judge to send him to Life Learning instead of the lock-down juvenile facility Log Cabin, the future is looking good. The former car thief once brought a loaded .357 Magnum to school. Now he plans to go into business as a barber.

"I'm a good barber," he said with a broad smile. "If I go to barber college, I figure I can open a shop in my grandma's garage. I could rebuild her garage using the skills I've learned here."

Reflecting on his tumultuous teens, TeMon said problems arose out of boredom. He lives in an apartment in a public housing development in the Bayview. School never challenged him. At Balboa High, he always arrived late, attended second and third periods, and split after lunch.

"When you find yourself asleep in the middle of the day, you know you don't have a life," TeMon said, smoothing his crisp khaki pants, part of the school uniform, which his grandmother says make him look sophisticated. "Now, when I go home from school, I'm tired. On weekends, I kick it. But on weekdays, I'm a schoolboy."

Another transformation is occurring with impish Falcon Harper, 15, who is finally learning to contain his energy.

### 'This kid is intense'

As his mother, Roxanne Harper said, "This kid is intense. He was never *not* disruptive in school. Since he was maybe 2½, I'd get calls every week from teachers who said they couldn't deal with him."

The Life Learning Academy took a few months to figure Falcon

out, something other schools never did, Roxanne said. "The thing that calms him, the thing that is his best therapy, is for him to move his body."

Early on, Silbert — who also has boundless energy — saw Falcon's antic edge as a strength.

"It's too hard for me to sit," Falcon shrugged. "Four walls make me crazy. Mimi told me that if I'm mad or all steamed up, I can go and run around."

Now, when Falcon is itching to move, he knows it's OK to sprint around Treasure Island. "I used to walk out, start running, get on the bus and go home," he said. "Now, I walk out, start running — and come back."

Teaching disengaged kids to enjoy learning is one of the most confounding challenges, educators say.

"The foremost impression I had when I visited the school is that every kid was engaged," said Lisbeth Schorr, a Harvard professor who studies effective interventions for disadvantaged kids. "That is amazing considering these kids have so many very real reasons to be off in the corner sulking."

### Process of teaching is different

Although the academy's course requirements are aligned with San Francisco Unified School District and graduates must meet the standards of the University of California system, the process of teaching is different.

Using the open setting of the school as a teaching tool, students select an environmentally based major each semester from the earth's elements: water, fire, earth and air. Students who major in fire may actually pursue a career in fire fighting. The San Francisco Fire Department has "adopted" the school.

Mayor Brown of Oakland said

he believes the Life Learning model is going to be successful because of the longer day and strong sense of community.

"We all live in a context that reinforces and supports our way of living and if that way of living is counterproductive and self-defeating, it isn't enough to preach," Mayor Brown said. "You have to provide a different context. Mimi is creating the micro environment where the individuality of these young people can be respected and worked with."

Another fan of the program is Valerie McKinney, whose daughter Jacquette Goodman, 16, attends the school.

"My daughter used to come home from school depressed and she'd tell me these sad stories about students," said McKinney, noting that her daughter has gone from getting D's and F's in math — her toughest subject — to a high B. "Now she begs to go to school."

Next year, Jacquette will be expected to help new students with math. The academy's philosophy, "each-one-teach-one," is based on the Delancey Street model.

"Doing community service is key," Silbert said. "When you've been in trouble, you're very passive and self-centered. It's all about me and my problems."

"The traditional way of dealing with social problems — and with education — is to have the person sit back and receive: a lecture, punishment, therapy," she added. "That's the worst thing you can do. It's very important they give, tutor and counsel. We don't talk about self-esteem but we devise ways for them to earn it."