

PARADISE

This School Teaches Hope

BY MICHAEL RYAN

San Francisco's Life Learning Academy pulls troubled teens out of the juvenile-justice system and gives them a reason to try.

‘WHEN YOU HAVE been hopeless for a long time, hope is the last thing you learn,” Mimi Silbert said as we walked through the former Navy base on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, where 60 young people are getting a chance at lives they never imagined could be theirs. They are attending a new public high school, chartered and funded by San Francisco and the State of California, that may be the only one of its kind.

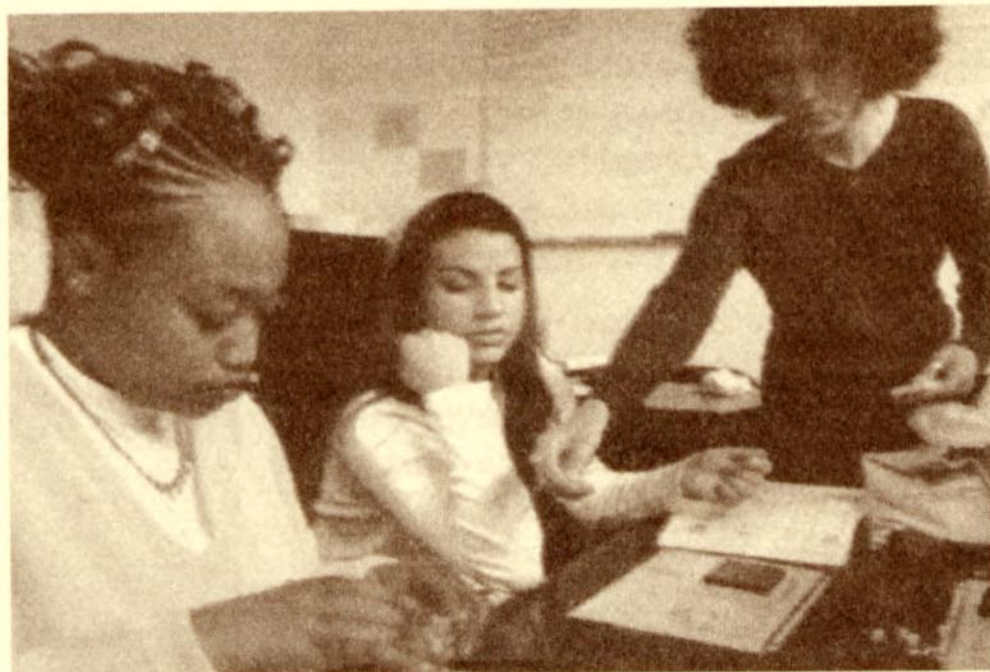
“Our focus is on kids who simply are not in school.”

Silbert said. “Many are in the juvenile-justice system. There aren’t lots of people who want to take these kids in.”

The Life Learning Academy, founded in 1998 by Silbert and a small team of dedicated teachers, *does* take them in. Many were dropouts, shoplifters,

gang members, drug dealers and drug users. The idea goes back to 1972, when Silbert founded “Delancey Street,” a San Francisco nonprofit institution that takes in adult addicts and ex-felons as residents and turns them into productive, clean and sober citizens.

“When we began,” Silbert said, “most of our people were first-generation addicts and criminals. Then we got second-generation. Now we see third-generation. Their parents and grandparents spent their lives in and out of prison and drugs.” she had to get to the third generation while they still were young. “There’s such a sense of despair with these kids,” she said. “They have the same problems that all adolescents have, and then they have all kinds of other problems. If your whole life is a problem, you display an anger and an attitude that makes it very difficult for someone to break through the wall you’ve created. The hardest part of our job is getting these kids to hope as high as they can.”



A class at Life Learning Academy with (l-r) Tiffany Robinson, 18, Sylvia Lacayo, 17, and their math teacher, Joanne da Luz.

In 1996, Silbert was appointed to head a commission to overhaul the city's juvenile-justice system. One of its first acts was to establish an "assessment center" where young people in trouble with the law would be sent when first arrested. Teens were surprised when they were taken to the center instead of Juvenile Hall and interviewed for a new high school instead of being booked and handcuffed.

"I got arrested, and they took me there," said Sylvia Lacayo, 17, charged with shoplifting. "They wanted to know if I went to school. I said, 'Yes,' but I never did. I was into drugs. I didn't have time for school." Impressed by Teri DeLane, a Delancey Street alumna with a Ph.D. who is now Life Learning's principal, Sylvia decided to give it a try. "It's hard for me to admit that I love the school," she said, "but I do. It has helped me a lot to get my life together. I went from being an F student to straight A's."

Life Learning does not achieve results like these by making school easier. Most students are delivered in vans to the campus by 8 a.m., and many stay until 10 p.m. In addition to taking all the courses required in public high school, the students have renovated



Wayne Brock (l), an applied-science instructor, uses radio-controlled cars to teach principles of physics to Kendrick Mitchell, 15, Willie Tookes, 18, and Elsa Chon, 17 (l-r).

their main school building and built a cafe that serves the public. The choice of Treasure Island was deliberate: The founders wanted the school to emphasize ecology, and its location on the water became a teaching tool. Students help to develop and landscape the school grounds, study the island's aquatic environment and learn about fire control.

"We try to alternate sitting time with action time," Silbert said. "We spend an hour in a classroom, then 40 minutes on a vocational project. Instead of calling kids 'hyperactive' and giving them Ritalin, we take

"The hardest part of our job is getting kids to hope as high as they can," says Mimi Silbert, who runs the academy.

that negative energy and turn it into positive energy."

Not every student came to the academy because of trouble with the law. "I was raped by a student at my old school," Ruqayyah Allen, 18, said frankly. "I was messed up. I stopped going to school." Life Learning gave her a new outlook. "I got my highest report card ever—a 3.87 average," said Allen. "I want to go to law school." She now attends City College of San Francisco.

"I didn't really have a mother or a dad," said Alex Garrett, 17. "They were both too busy in the streets." Then his mother and stepfather became residents at Delancey Street. "After my mom graduated from Delancey, I could look up to her," he said. When his mother told Alex about Silbert's new school, he signed up. "I never could get a good grade before I came here," said Alex. "But I thought, if my parents could turn their lives around, I could turn mine around."