Second Chance for Young Thugs

If you take the worst high school losers in the city, the most dramatic nonachievers, kids who can't read and don't give a rat's rear, who are into drugs and guns and assorted mischief, and you ship them to a desolate island in the middle of San Francisco Bay, what do you have?

Alcatraz High, right?

Close. Geographically close, anyway. Life Learning Academy, a.k.a. Treasure Island High — is just a short row from Alcatraz, and you have to be damaged goods to wind up at either place.

But Alcatraz was despair. Life Learning is hope.

To become a student here, you have to get very, very low. Cory remembers his low point: his freshman year at a San Francisco high school, when he was busted on campus with a loaded .32 pistol and a bag of weed big enough to qualify him as a dealer.

"I got caught up with a rival crew, and I heard they were aiming for me," Cory says, explaining the gun.

By the way, in this context, "rival crew" does not refer to another school's rowing team.

Cory holds the moment in his mental photo album. He is leaning over the principal's desk as the cops cuff his wrists behind him, and he looks up to see the principal smiling because he has one less armed thug to deal with.

A year later, with Cory on probation for misdemeanors including burglary and sporting a GPA of 0.85 (what, a D-minus in gym?), a light flickered.

He heard about LLA and begged his way in. That was last year. Now he's got at least six colleges offering him scholarships.

The typical student arriving here can't read, has been abused, does drugs, commits crimes, gang-bangs, has a disaster of a home life, is very pissed off and very alone. He or she must convince the administration that he or she truly wants to try a different path.

After two years here, the typical student has a legit strong GPA, can fight fires, repair bikes, speak Japanese or Spanish, run a small business, build buildings, prepare meals from scratch (step one: grow the food), use a computer, express thoughts, care about others, and see beyond the street corner.

Life Learning Academy was started two years ago by Mimi Silbert, who runs Delancey Street Foundation. Willie Brown asked her to overhaul the city's juvenile justice system, and as one aspect of the project, Silbert wanted to open a high school based on the Delancey Street philosophy. The mayor gave her a small, rundown building on Treasure Island.

The students took up hammers and saws and have expanded the building from 8,000 square feet to 24,000, and turned it into the hippest, cleanest school in the city.

"Someone asked me the other day if the kids mess up the school," says Silbert, and she laughs. "They built this school. If I put my hands on the wall, they get upset with me."