Kim DaRosa, who is working toward a college degree, arranged place settings for a lunch at Delancey Street.

Mimi Silbert, president and founder of Delancey Street Foundation, lectured to students working toward a bachelor's degree.
Mimi Silbert spoke to Delancey Street Foundation students, including (from left) Freddie Baca, John Pavao, Gerald Miller, Desi Rutherford and Anita Jackson.

“My interest in the school thing was always there, but by the time I started getting into prison at 35... I thought it was too late.”
ROBERT MANSFIELD, student, 51

Kim DaRosa is just 31, but she remembers her high school years only dimly. She was high on drugs most of the time and skipped classes to run with her gang.

“I failed P.E. (in high school). To ever even dream that I’d get a college degree is just amazing,” said DaRosa. When she started working toward her bachelor’s, she was terrified she wouldn’t be smart enough.

“I never thought I would make it. But I get good grades,” she said.

DaRosa is one of the 14 residents at the Delancey Street Foundation who are earning degrees in urban studies through an unusual partnership with San Francisco State University.

Some were illiterate when they arrived at Delancey Street.

The self-help residential program has not only given them a chance at turning their lives around, but also at getting a piece of paper they never thought they would see: a college diploma.

“My interest in the school thing was always there, but by the time I started getting into prison at 35 and I got (to Delancey Street) at 45, I thought it was too late,” said Robert Mansfield, 51. “It took a couple of years to see a different future. ... Now, I don’t see any limits.”

The program, which began in the spring, was developed after Mimi Silbert, founder, president and CEO of Delancey Street Foundation, approached San Francisco State President Robert Corrigan with the idea last year. Corrigan welcomed the partnership.
“What I’ve been pushing is how we reach out to different populations,” he said.

gave him a big hug, heckling, “What about green tea?”

school before but had never been able to stick with it before. “The classes

Delancey’s college students

“It is kind of a social commitment to serve an at-risk population striving mightly to reform itself.”

The program’s teachers are all approved by San Francisco State Professor Raquel Pinderhughes, who runs the program and volunteers her time to teach a research methods class. Others at the top of their fields teach courses free of charge as well. Senate President Pro tem John Burton, D-San Francisco, taught politics last quarter. Former San Francisco Muni chief Emilio Cruz is teaching urban transportation.

“We believe that these are voices that need to be heard in urban planning and policy debates,” Pinderhughes said. “They have a particular and unique perspective.”

Pinderhughes said that because the program is taught by volunteers, it does not cost the campus anything beyond some administrative time.

Although the curriculum is the same as for students on the main 19th Avenue Campus, the classes for the Delancey Street residents are taught where they live, at the foundation complex near Pacific Bell Park. As a result, the atmosphere is sometimes less predictable than on campus.

One evening recently, as his students listened attentively, Cruz launched straight into the intricacies of urban transportation and federal spending plans for transportation that emphasize connections and different modes.

But as Cruz introduced the students to ISTEA (Intermodel Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) and TEA21 (Transportation Equity Act for the 21st century), Silbert bounded into the room with her dog Amnesty and

Charles Williams, 41, was just a few units short of graduating from the Ivy League’s Dartmouth College when he signed a free agent contract with the Philadelphia Eagles.

But he was dropped after half a year in the pros and fell into drugs and despair. He spent years in and out of San Quentin before entering Delancey Street in 1996.

“We literally believe ourselves to be the Harvard of the underclass,” said Silbert, Who is teaching community organizing in the program. “It is the most wonderful thing that could happen – to get formal recognition, and to have our people … get a B.A. degree like everybody else.”

The residents, who have already taken two years of general education courses through Golden Gate University, take a full load of about three courses a quarter and are on track to graduate in June 2003. They fit classes and homework in around a demanding work schedule that comes with being part of running the foundation’s restaurant, café, moving company and Christmas tree and decoration business.

“I’m the kind of person who wants to learn things,” said Diana Sanders, 45, who said she had played at going to