

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA | SEPTEMBER 8, 2011

For 40 Years, an Advocate for the Underclass

By GEOFFREY A. FOWLER

Forty years ago, Mimi Silbert founded the Delancey Street Foundation, a San Francisco residential training center for drug abusers, ex-convicts and the homeless. Now celebrated as one of the most successful rehabilitation programs in the U.S., Delancey Street's residents run a popular restaurant, a moving service and other businesses.



Annie Tritt for The Wall Street Journal

Mimi Silbert, founder of San Francisco's Delancey Street Foundation

Delancey has an annual budget of about \$18 million. It houses and educates some 2,000 people at any given time in San Francisco and satellite operations in Los Angeles, New Mexico, North Carolina, New York and Massachusetts.

This year, Ms. Silbert, 69 years old, has been battling cancer. Over tea at Delancey Street's restaurant on the Embarcadero, she recently discussed California's growing underclass, her new San Francisco project and her own legacy. Edited excerpts:

WSJ: What has made Delancey Street's model work?

Ms. Silbert: It is run completely by its residents. Everyone is responsible for teaching everyone else. The people who have been helped also have helped numerous people under them. This is a horrible world, and it needs people who want to pull everyone up.

We live like an Israeli kibbutz. What monies we earn, we put in the middle, and that's about 60% of what supports us.

I call us the Harvard of the underclass. We work very hard to get the bottom 1% or 2% of the country. Harvard gives you academic skills; we give you academic skills and vocational skills, and we teach you to get along with people that are very unlike yourself. And we have a better football team.

WSJ: Has your recidivism rate changed?

Ms. Silbert: In our first 30 years, we lost less than 20%, and of those I took a lot of them back in. In the last 10 years, I would guess it has probably gotten worse—and not because we are worse. Society is getting worse and worse, by the minute.

WSJ: How have Delancey's residents changed?

Ms. Silbert: In the last few years, the underclass has become like a serious underdeveloped country in America. It is so overwhelming that people don't want to see it—that's why we put them in prison. To be a third-generation gang member means that your grandmother is saying—as has happened—'Get out of that woman's program and get back here, people need revenge and we need money from the dope.' Imagine getting that from your grandmother.

They come in here with so much despair. They know prison rules, and prison politics. If you moved your way up there, people are holding your TV set and your way to get to the good meat—the things that matter in prison.

WSJ: You say you are like a mother to Delancey's residents. Does the organization depend on you to continue?

Ms. Silbert: There are people who have come through Delancey that have it in their guts. That is why I have set the system up in this way. Once I die, they will stay and run it.

WSJ: Do you have an heir apparent?

Ms. Silbert: Yes, but nobody knows. Every few years I change it, because I keep living. There are so many issues to Delancey Street, so I have an heir apparent for this and for that.

I used to say to Howard Lester [a Delancey supporter and the owner of Williams-Sonoma, who died in 2010], I am much luckier than you are. Our place just needed people to think it up and start it, and now they've got it in their belly.

WSJ: What about San Francisco allowed it to give rise to Delancey Street?

Ms. Silbert: San Francisco [in 1971] was such a tolerant city, although when we first moved in to Pacific Heights, there were people fighting over whether we could live there. But then people said Delancey could only happen in San Francisco. So I immediately went and found what was at the time the most conservative state, New Mexico, and set up another Delancey Street there.

You just have to insist on being overwhelmingly cheerful and invite everybody you know to come over and have dinner. Eventually they will come around.

WSJ: What's next for Delancey?

Ms. Silbert: We just closed on a home for people coming out of prison. It's going to be a transitional house or a shelter for those people who aren't going to come to Delancey but have nowhere else to live. It is in the Outer Sunset, and cost about \$2.3 million. It has eight two-bedroom units and four one-bedroom units. But to us, a two-bedroom unit could house a lot of people.

WSJ: What gave you this idea?

Ms. Silbert: I can't live with what is going on in the prison system. I become like a crazy person, screaming and yelling about the prison system. The system is filled with people who have absolutely no use being in prison.

It struck me: Even if these people get jobs when they come out, they will have no place to live, and the whole thing will tangle itself. It is up to us to untangle it. We have been doing this for 40 years, and know what it is like for these people.

WSJ: You have spent the majority of your life living with ex-convicts and trying to fix seeming intractable problems. Why?

Ms. Silbert: What would I do? Play golf? Go shopping? These things are not interesting to me. This consumes my being, and I love it.

I still believe that we can change the world, with enough graduates with an understanding of democracy and dignity. I have the best life of anybody.