

THE COMMON GROUND INTERVIEW

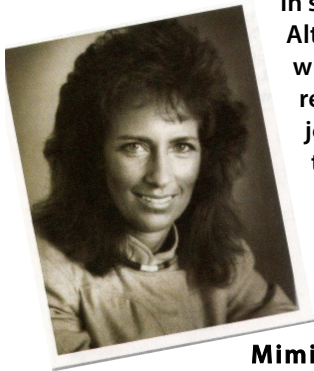
Delancey Street's Mimi Silbert

Harvard on the Embarcadero for the lowest 1%

{Interview by Rob Sedon}

Dr. Mimi Halper Silbert is the dynamic force behind the Delancey Street Foundation, which is headquartered on a self-sufficient 430,000-square-foot facility built by residents along San Francisco's Embarcadero. The model for six centers nationwide and numerous replicas, Delancey Street serves ex-felons, prostitutes, substance abusers, and others who have hit bottom, with the requisite academic, vocational, and social skills needed to participate in society legally and successfully – at no cost to the client or taxpayer.

Although she does not share the same background as her fellow residents, Mimi works nonstop without salary, living and abiding by the same rules and "Each One Teach One" approach. The recipient of numerous distinctions and awards, she is a Mother Teresa – like figure whose greatest joy is extending love. Mimi, the mother of two grown sons and the emotional bedrock to tens of thousands, has been convalescing from six strokes and the cancer she's had for several years. The endless chemotherapy and radiation sessions forced the postponement of this interview several times. We were fortunate to catch up with Mimi last month at the Delancey Street Restaurant just in time for our "Bay Pride" issue.



Common Ground: What is Delancey Street Foundation?

Mimi Silbert: It's a very odd organization because it's 43 years old but it's not really a program. I don't know what else to call it but the Harvard of the underclass. This is a place where you come to live as a last chance when you're poor, you've been in prison, you've been using, everything – you've left school in the fifth grade. Many can't read or drive a car. It's a place where people come when nothing has gone right – often for several generations. Many have grandmothers who were in gangs.

The way it works for the underclass is you either get help, which is never enough, or get money, which is never enough, or get thrown in prisons where nothing comes, where society doesn't need you and no one cares. These days, society barely needs its middle class, let alone its underclass.

So what happens inside for the lowest echelon?

Because our people have been pretty violent, at first they learn to settle down. It takes a few months to just be able to talk to another gang member without wanting to kill them. We have a "no violence" rule – not even a threat of violence. They live in integrated dorms, and the truth is they just don't do it (commit violence). Everyone asks me why, and I say, "I don't know, I think they own it."





“We go to prisons and jails and look for the lowest 1 percent, and instead of just focusing on their problems, we teach them how to get along with each other since all they know is being in prisons killing each other. We teach them all about themselves, and because we’re Harvard, we’re on a semester system. Each semester you move up a little.”

We teach academics, so that you first get a GED. It’s set up that if you can read the eighth grade level, then you’re tutoring someone who can read at the sixth grade level. It goes all the way down to a person who doesn’t know the alphabet. The core curriculum goes all the way up through art appreciation and music appreciation. You go the museums and learn about music, literature. When you do all that, you slowly feel better. So there’s the academic training, then there’s the vocational training. We built our building and successful business like Delancey Street Restaurant and the Crossroads Café. First you start out as a dishwasher. The dishwashers are trained by the prep cooks, who have just made it up from dishwasher. The line cooks are slowly training the prep cooks. We have a moving company. We take care of ourselves. We feed each other, take care of our finances, take care of the automotive.

There isn’t a thing that would go on in an organization taking care of 500 people that is not done by a resident. Whereas at best, they might have been

helped a little on the way, never in their lives have they owned anything, but Delancey Street is theirs.

A Harvard where only the lowest 1 percent are admitted.

Exactly. We go to prisons and jails and look for the lowest 1 percent, and instead of just focusing on their problems, we teach them how to get along with each other since all they know is being in prisons killing each other. We teach them all about themselves, and because we’re Harvard, we’re on a semester system. Each semester you move up a little. You move up in your housing, you move up in the clothes that you get – everything – but only if you have earned it. But pretty much everyone earns it because they’re living in a group environment, and the group carries you.

Delancey Street is an organization that finds strengths and uses those strengths. Our moving company has been voted Best of the Bay for 15 years or something, and it’s run by people who used to go into people’s homes to take things.

I’ve wanted to do this interview for a long time, but your health has been too fragile. What’s happened?

I know, and you’ve been so patient. Thank you. I’ve had six strokes and I’m still fighting a cancer. I believe I’ll be fantastic because that’s how life goes. I guess this is just a bad period for me, with endless chemo and radiation. It was supposed to have been over a long time ago.

What’s been the effect on you?

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It's been effective for me because when you don't feel well and you just had chemo and everything and can't speak, there's a part of you that just wants to lie around eating white chocolates and say, "Oh poor me, poor me," which is the worst thing to allow anybody to do at Delancey Street. It brought me back to the basics, which is that it doesn't matter what has happened to you, you've just got to get up, and you've got to do something and make it right.

I was brought up with an enormous amount of love. I had all this love in me, so it wasn't difficult for me to give off love and help people. I couldn't even have done anything else. I've never really said this aloud but having a really bad sickness has reminded me what it feels like to be a newcomer (to Delancey Street). In my case, it's feeling I don't have the joy and the love and the wonderfulness to give, but then you just do it.

What's the experience of newcomers?

When you first enter through the door you're basically psychopathic. You don't care. You've used drugs for 20 to 30 years. Some have been in prison for 25 years and made up a whole range of rationalizations. It takes a long time to care. I tell them, "Act as if you really care." You might not feel it, but act as if you care about helping another person. The first step for a newcomer is to get out of yourself, to stop thinking about yourself and worry about another. If A helps B, then A gets better. We have no idea what happens to you as B, but hopefully you'll help C, and you'll get better. And so on.

Fake it till you make it?

It's bigger than faking. It's feeling it like a little kid putting on her mother's shoes. She's not faking it; she really believes she's wearing this long shoe. And one day she does. Residents always ask, "When do you know you've made it." I say, "You have no idea." You're acting "as if" until one day – I don't know, it's Tuesday at 3 a.m. – and you've just seen five dollars on the floor. You pick it up and wake up your doorman and say, "Here's five dollars." No one would have known had you quietly put it in your pocket. Or you're telling somebody not to leave.

What do you mean "not to leave"?

Dope fiends give up every time something gets hard. Newcomers want to leave, but even though they're not really feeling it, they're encouraging other newcomers not to leave because they're told to talk that way. But all of a sudden one day they feel, "No, no, don't give up. If you give up, we all give up." And suddenly they feel it.

So you too became a beginner?

Exactly. By being sick I was back to being a beginner talking to newcomers, and the newcomers helped me. They were talking about their lives, and I realized, "Who cares what I've got? I'll get over it. They surely feel 100



Mimi with senior residents at Delancey Street's 430,000-square-foot facility on the Embarcadero, built by ex-cons.

times worse." That's my version of Delancey Street. In all honesty, the newcomers always help you.

You started the foundation on Delancey Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side. When did you move it there?

No, (San Francisco) was where we started it. My parents, when they first came to this country, snuck over on a ship from Eastern Europe, where things were very difficult for Jews. They lived on Delancey Street. What's fascinating is that many people who lived that way carry a bitterness about them, but my parents came with the greatest love for making things better. I don't know a person who knew my father that couldn't tell you he was the most loving, giving person that existed. He had no money, but that was irrelevant. He gave. I am really my daddy's girl; I haven't lived up to half of my father's lovingness.

Why San Francisco?

I came to graduate school in San Francisco. We started here, and we normally have around 500 residents, but it's a little down now to around 400 because I need to know everybody, and I want to keep it that way. It's just that I won't have the energy until I get through all this sickness. We have 430,000 square feet and six facilities around the country.

To the residents, you're like their mom.



Receiving honorary doctorate at Brandeis University with sons Gregory and David and their wives, Laura and Rebecca

Yes. They do call me Mom all the time. I say, "No, no, I'm just Mimi." A lot of them have never had a mom, and I love them. Please understand that I am in love with our residents. I cannot think of a better thing anyone could ever do 24 hours a day than be with the residents.

It's very unusual that such a large organization operates on the premise of an extended family.

It's not just a premise; it *is* an extended family. We all hit bottom – that's why we're here. Now we're all trying to find our strengths to climb to the top of the mountain. Together, as family, we have to hold on. I may accept all the awards, and we've gotten a ton of them from everyone I can think of – every religious group from Mahatma Gandhi, the Pope, the Jews, the Muslims – you name something. I get the award and say, "Thank you very much, blah, blah, blah," but I always bring some residents with me and have them stand up, and I actually throw the award to them because it honestly isn't mine.

Delancey Street has been described as the most successful rehabilitation facility in the world. Can you say why?

I guess that's what people say. We've gone from having no money to saving money. We've gone from a teeny house to now having six facilities around the country. The one in Los Angeles is this big, if not bigger. We have a 17-acre ranch in New Mexico; a house in Brewster, New York; Norman Rockwell's old house in Massachusetts, where there's an art program; a house in North Carolina. Now there are many replications. There's one in Africa which we've gone to see, and Alaska and Texas. People come and try to learn from us, and we teach. They come from other states and cities and other countries. We have a three-day program that I've set up, but I'm very slow to warm up. It's like dating in the '50's. There's a first date, then a second date, then eventually you get pinned, then engaged, and then you see where it goes. If we see that an organization has the fire in the belly to replicate what we do, then we keep going. It's not an easy program to replicate. They can't use our name.

We've been studied and considered the best model, but that's because it's really tough. Residents here have to go to school and get vocationally trained. They must train with other gang members they don't like. They have to not learn about themselves and get stronger, and learn onto to rationalize. It's just what you and I have to do in life, but it can be especially difficult if you've been on drugs for 40 years.

But there's no philosophy, there's no 12-step. Is there spiritualism?

There's a huge spiritualism but it has nothing to do with religion. It's spiritualism that emphasizes learning about decency and taking care of others and standing fast on principles and integrity. Integrity that nothing can stand between you and what you believe in. That's what I consider spiritualism, and I believe it's what made America great back in the beginning. People needed everybody. If you fixed shoes, everybody liked you – you were the shoe fixer. Nobody lived who wasn't needed. These beliefs are very old-fashioned. No, it has no 12 steps, although if I knew the 12 steps – which I don't – I'm sure we live them.

You have big meeting with all the residents together?

Yes, family meetings, and everybody's there. Usually, I run my mouth and my hands are in the air, jumping up and down. I get a lot of feedback about problems because of course, everybody has the same problems. The self-destructive patterns are obvious when they're shared. For example, no one just come out and says, "I wanna quit and shoot dope." It comes off as, "I need to go save my grandmother." But then of course it becomes, "Oops, on the way to grandma's I had no intention, but I saw somebody selling, etc., etc." Sometimes we laugh about these things for a full five minutes to help people get out of the self-destructive tunnel and to remind them to hold onto each other. A dope fiend has lived their life rationalizing and then suddenly here they find themselves in the middle of the tunnel. The life behind them is black, but they can't see the light in front of them either. Family meetings are a place to make fun of oneself. By pushing forward you eventually hit a new sense of yourself, identify self-destruction, and become a different person.

You do this all intuitively?

Yes, and I believe you would do it the exact same way. If somebody gave you 35 prisoners, and they moved into your house, you'd say, "You'll all have to help out because I'm certainly not doing your laundry. Who wants to be head of laundry?" You wouldn't sit there yourself trying to run them all.

A great saint from India once told me the world was roughly divided into three types of people: the ones who only eat the food off their own plates, the ones who not only eat their own portion but attempts to steal from their neighbors, and the ones who offer their food to the others.

I personally don't think anyone can live comfortably with themselves if they're not sharing everything they have. If you ask our people what makes them feel best, it's how much they've given to somebody else. It's the one thing that worries me about this

country. For heaven's sake, if we say "individualistic" one more time....No, we are a community. All those statements, like "United we stand, divided we fall," are true. No one's that interested in just riding around in their own Corvette.

Were you always that way? Selfless?

If you asked a fly on the wall who watched my parents bring me up, it would say I was a princess. But nothing has ever brought me any happiness but giving. The act of service makes you so inspired that it's selfish. If you want to look at it that way.

I get invited to the symphony, but always take residents. If I just went myself, the music would elevate my mood, but nothing as elevating as when I'm sitting there with residents, and I'm saying, "Okay, this is what happened to Beethoven, and now you're going to hear it, and it's the beginning of the Ninth Symphony..." So when you're hearing it for the 10th time, it's great but nothing as perfect as watching somebody experience it for the first time. So you get both.

Is rehabilitation the right word?

I don't know. The word is funny to me because most were never habilitated to begin with; they're just assholes who never had a chance in life. They come here, and for some weird reason, we love them and we believe in them and they run the place.

You've seen that movie Trading Places, right?

No.

Really? You have to see it. It's a comedy about a criminal and the whole question of nature vs. nurture. It has Eddie Murphy and Dan Ackroyd –

No, no, don't tell me what it's about; I don't want to know. I'll see it and I'll call you. I like everything from its original, but I think I know what you're asking. I am a person who has chosen to be a trick. I believe that if I believe in you, you'll rise. Yet I know that sometimes you won't. Then I am an ass crying afterward if it doesn't work. But I believe that everyone, including me and all of us – sometimes we're at our worst, and sometimes we're at our best. To not know that about life is to miss the whole point. Nobody's good and nobody's bad. We're both good and bad. You had a bad day? Fix it, get rid of it, and move on. That's what happens to all of us. We all have bad days.

But Delancey Street is simply the last chance for many.

This is the last chance for most people, the court of last resorts. You need to know that anything you do for a long period of time becomes your way. The United States puts more people in prison than any other country in the world. We're nuts. We don't understand that to change crime, you have to turn criminals around. If you've spent most of your life in prison and come out, you can't do anything. It's as if you're living on Mars. It can be a lot easier using dope or staying in prison because you're not forced to look at anything, and a prisoner in jail can be important in the community. Prison makes you meaner, harsher, more in gangs, less educated. That's what we're up against.



Clockwise from top: Mimi touring the grounds with Prime Minister Tony Blair and Mayor Gavin Newsom; with Romero, who served 23 years in various prisons; in conversation with former secretary of state George Schultz in 2006



Criminologists and judges are not optimists?

Of course not. They send you to prison. It's awful for them – just horrible.

Outside of the criminal justice system, can you name another pet peeve?

The way people live on computers. They have friends on Face book, and they have no other friends. That's a horrible, horrible phenomenon. You have to have friends whose eyes you can look into. And when you look into their eyes, you can say, "Well, he's sort of happy, but there's a sadness. I wonder what's going on." WE have to take time to talk about sadness. You have to know that. That's what makes life fantastic.

What do you love about the Bay Area?

Oh, I love the Bay Area. I love all the good parts, and I love the fact that it believes it's so tolerant yet isn't as tolerant as it should be. I love that the Bay Area, more than any place I know, understands community, going back to Berkeley in the '60's when everyone lived in communes. It's getting harder and harder to be a community. We don't like it. We want everything the same. We want everybody to get a salary and drive a car and keep their mouths shut because the economy and the whole country is in difficulty. But to me the Bay Area is in the least difficulty because we have our own set of values and ain't nobody gonna take them away. People here work their hardest to make this a more tolerant place.