

# “Each one, teach one”

## Delancey Street Foundation

By John Cowen

### DELANCEY STREET FOUNDATION

San Francisco, California

[www.delanceystreetfoundation.org](http://www.delanceystreetfoundation.org)



### MIMI SILBERT

President and CEO

*What if someone told you there's an organization that has transformed felons, gang members, drug addicts and prostitutes into business owners, city council members, attorneys, certified public accountants and police officers?*

*Would you believe them?*

*What if they told you the organization has no professional aid workers, not even any professional employees at all? That there is no government funding? That all services are provided free of charge to the clients?*

*Would you believe them then?*

*Finally, what if someone told you the organization has transformed more than 14,000 individuals who were at the bottom of society into productive, tax-paying citizens with a renewed sense of dignity?*

*If your name is Mimi Silbert, you started believing it was possible nearly 40 years ago . . .*

## THE ORIGINS

Silbert and ex-con John Maher founded the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco in 1971 with a \$1,000 loan and a passion to help people others viewed as unredeemable. From then to now, the organization has been completely client-run and has followed the motto, “Each one, teach one.” There are no therapists, no case workers, no professional social service officers – only the people who need help rebuilding their lives. They rely on their peers, the only ones who truly understand their situation. And, most importantly, they rely on themselves, the only ones who can really make a change in their own lives.

Today, Delancey Street operates more than 20 affirmative businesses that in 2007 collectively generated \$15 million in annual sales. Total earned revenue during that year – including investment income, rent and interest on savings and investments – came to \$18.7 million, which covered more than 88% of the



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organization's total expenses. Delancey Street also received \$3.7 million in cash contributions and \$7.1 million in non-cash contributions.

Silbert and Maher started Delancey Street by welcoming others to share their small apartment. According to Silbert, “whoever could cook became the head of Food Service, whoever had held a hammer became the head of Construction, whoever could read tutored those who could not.” Silbert, Maher and the others pooled their abilities and their funds and after only two years purchased a residential building, the former Russian Consulate. Nearly 100 residents were soon living there together; learning, teaching and helping each other.

## THE MODEL

Ask any resident of Delancey Street and he or she will tell you “each one, teach one” is the core of the organization. Because there are no employees, residents must perform all the tasks necessary to make the living arrangements work. The model works *by empowering the people who have the problems to become the solution.*

In this way, each individual is given real responsibility and serves as a necessary support to all the others. According to Silbert, taking that responsibility is the first and greatest step toward rehabilitation for those who previously lived life knowing only how to look out for themselves and to destroy things around them.

New residents have to learn where they fit in and the only way is for the incumbents to teach them. This is another important piece of the model as it provides each individual with even more responsibility. Residents have to be able to teach what they do. When they succeed it brings them respect, enhances their leadership skills and offers them the same sense of dignity every human being strives for and needs.



Residents have a mandatory stay of at least two years. The average duration is four years, and in this time they receive an academic education as well as training in three marketable job skills, including at least one manual skill, one clerical skill and one interpersonal skill. Through this demanding vocational training program, former addicts, felons, prostitutes and homeless individuals are taught skills in the building trades, purchasing, contracting, computer and accounting services.

On any given day, Delancey Street serves an average population of 1,500 people. Senior residents serve as “staff” and all residents receive a small amount of “walking around” money but no salaries.

About one-third of the clients do not make it, but the organization keeps going and as a result has helped more than 14,000 individuals thought to be unsalvageable. That number is especially impressive given that the average client at Delancey Street has 18 felonies, an eighth grade education and seven years in prison.



When clients are ready to graduate, they get an outside job and usually continue to live in the Delancey Street complex for several months. They save their money in the Delancey Street-managed credit union and pay rent until they can move on and continue their new lives in the mainstream of society.

Silbert sums up the work being done at Delancey Street this way: “I see the lowest 10 per cent of society come through the door . . . but, a few years later, strong, decent human beings walk out . . .”

## EXPORTING THE MODEL

The old Russian Consulate was located in a very wealthy area and the neighbors soon became worried about their new neighbors. Following the strategy Delancey Street has always maintained, clients took the responsibility upon themselves and began patrolling the area.

With the presence of these recovering ex-cons, the neighborhood actually saw a decrease in crime. Years later, when Delancey Street left the old Russian Consulate for a bigger building, the once skeptical neighbors expressed their sadness to be losing such a big part of their community. The model was working.

Carol Kizziah of Delancey Street remembers, “After [the] initial success in San Francisco, people said it only worked because the city is so liberal and (Delancey Street) is not a model that could be expanded to work consistently. So, in 1978, they expanded into rural, conservative New Mexico to prove it is an effective model that does work. And it works because of the structure and processes involved, not because of the outside environment in which it exists.”

Delancey Street further refined the start-up process just two years later by purchasing another home in New York. Residents from both San Francisco and New Mexico relocated and provided the management needed. Suddenly, ex-felons were being used for their “expertise” in leading a rehabilitation movement. The same strategy took Delancey Street to Los Angeles in 1984 and to North Carolina in 1987. Older buildings were purchased and renovations carried out by the residents.

As operations grew geographically, the organization also needed a new location in San Francisco, so the residents went to work to build it themselves. Construction began on a new complex, four stories high and covering an entire city block. In 1990, they completed a 400,000 sq. ft. structure that houses nearly 500 residents and is outfitted with training facilities to teach residents the skills they need to sustain the organization and become productive members of society.



## THE BUSINESSES

Perhaps the most popular question all this invokes is: How has this been possible with no government funding?

The answer lies in the same mentality that has been the driving force for the entire organization. If you need something, create it yourself. Silbert began forming businesses operated by the residents. She remembers it all started when “one of the neighbors asked us to help clear out a living room for a party. I was standing there when a resident picked up the grand piano and said, ‘What do you want me to do with this?’

“That’s when I went, ‘Boing, boing, boing, boing!’ We’re a natural moving company! These guys sit in prison all day getting buffed, lifting weights eight hours a day. So we went home and wrote ‘Moving’ in real kooky letters, and ‘We’ll do it for less,’ and we put a flyer under the windshield of every car and we just leafleted, leafleted, leafleted for months, actually. . . until somebody finally called the phone number.”

Today Delancey Street Movers has a fleet of trucks and the company has expanded into catering, furniture design and transport services for senior citizens and people who are handicapped.



Next, Delancey Street created a construction business. By working so hard to renovate old buildings, transforming them into their own residences, and actually constructing the massive complex in San Francisco, a labor force with real skills in the building trade had been formed. This led to the creation of a construction and property management enterprise.

The Delancey Street Restaurant opened in 1991 and serves as one of the key training schools in the organization. The restaurant is also profitable, using all revenue, including tips, to cover the restaurant’s operating costs, with the rest going to support other programs. The restaurant is located

on the Embarcadero in San Francisco, is part of the central Delancey Street facility, and has received frequent recognition, including “The Friendliest Restaurant in San Francisco” and being named one of “San Francisco’s Delicious Dozen.” As with all aspects of the organization, the restaurant is run completely by the residents.

In total, the Delancey Street Foundation now operates more than 20 businesses, covering a broad range of industries and skill sets:

- Accounting and bookkeeping
- Automotive mechanical repair and painting
- Christmas tree sales and commercial decorating
- Coach and para-transit transportation services
- Coffeehouse, art gallery and bookstore

- Construction and property management
- Digital printing and banners, silk-screen, and framing
- Film screening
- Handcrafted wood, terrarium, iron works and furniture
- Moving and trucking
- Retail and advertising specialties sales
- Restaurant, catering and event planning
- Upholstery and sewing
- Warehousing
- Welding

Some of the businesses make money and some do not, but all serve as training schools for the residents, and their collective profits cover a major portion of the organization's operating expenses. ■

