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SUNDAY PROFILE *Mimi Silbert*

For many, a first home and a second chance

By Meredith May
Chronicle Staff Writer

Mimi Silbert scans the tailored suits, shirts and ties that are matched together inside her warehouse.

“Hmm-hmm. Yes, that’s nice,” she purrs. Then, as if she’s just seen a spirit, Silbert halts.

“WHO did this?” she demands of the six ex-cons in the room, whipping a kelly green tie out of a gray suit and dropping it to the floor.

It’s clear whoever mismatched the tie to the suit made much more than a simple fashion faux pas.

Silbert, the driving force behind Delancey Street, the world renowned self-help drug rehabilitation center, has been living off candy bars and skipping sleep to assemble five to eight professional outfits as gifts for each of her 500 charges – former criminals, addicts and prostitutes, many of whom have never had a Christmas.

For the residents, who live with Silbert at the villa-style campus along the Embarcadero in San Francisco, the business suit is the symbol of a second chance. It’s the VIP pass back into society, so things like color combinations matter. A lot. Many of Silbert’s roommates have bottomed out after an average 12 years of drug addiction and four trips to prison. Delancey dwellers spend an average of four years rebuilding their lives, learning values and a trade in one of many Delancey enterprises: the Christmas tree lots, the restaurant, the moving company, or wood furniture making.

Silbert and her late partner, John Maher, a reformed heroin addict, created Delancey in 1971 – out of their apartment, with \$1,000 – to offer an alternative to what they saw as a punishment-based state rehabilitation system. He was co-president until 1984, when a conviction for drunken driving forced him to resign. Four years later, he died of a heart attack, and Silbert has kept Delancey running ever since.

Over almost four decades, Delancey has grown to a \$30 million foundation following an each-one-teach-one philosophy – Silbert has never taken a dime from the government, given herself a salary or hired anyone. The residents do everything – from answering the phones to teaching the academic classes to building the dorms and counseling one another.

Bottom 1 percent

Like the opposite of an Ivy League school, Silbert likes to say she takes the bottom 1 percent. She stopped counting how many people she had rehabilitated a decade ago, when she hit the 15,000 mark. So, yes, the tie must match the suit. It’s critical that a person’s first Christmas be a good one. I’m madly in love with the underclass and the screw-ups,” said the perpetually revved-up Silbert, 68, who makes her points by banging forks on tables or getting up and dancing to express joy. “This is a fire in the belly – not a job.”

Silbert has been consulted by former President Bill Clinton’s drug czar, visited by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and inducted into the Bay Area Business Hall of Fame. Even San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom sought counseling from Silbert at Delancey in 2007, following an affair with his campaign manager’s wife that he partially blamed on his problems with alcohol. Officials in hundreds of cities in 47 states and 26 countries have flown her in for training sessions, yet few have replicated what Delancey can do.

That’s because Silbert has given herself over to Delancey in a way few social workers are willing or able to do. She’s been at Delancey since day one, and even raised her twin sons, from a prior marriage, there. On a typical day, her 4-foot-11 frame is a blur as she whips about the 400,000-square-foot complex. She taste-tests the salmon in the restaurant, checks the donation room to make sure there are not toys that promote violence, shakes hands with dinner guests who want to meet her, leads a residents meeting, conducts a tour for visiting officials, then stops by the Christmas tree lots to check on sales.



Mimi Silbert runs Delancey Street, a rehab program and self-help center.



Mimi Silbert drops in at a Delancey Street Christmas tree lot and talks with Paul Manasian and his 5-year-old son, Aidan. Her foundation also supports a restaurant and a moving company.

She refuses to carry a cell phone except while traveling at the airport and doesn't have an e-mail address, citing both inventions as too impersonal. She knows the backstory on every resident, along with their neck size and shoe size. Some watched their mothers overdose, others were kidnapped by relatives, some grew up in bars with their fathers, many were abandoned by their parents, a good number have never been to school. "We don't do things like other places," she said. "We don't boo-hoo in therapy sessions about broken childhoods. Blaming leads to acting out to guilt and a cycle of self-hate. At some point, you gotta cut it out. Everyone has the ability to sink to the worst or rise to the best of themselves.

Playing Santa

On Dec. 25, Silbert, a former high school cheerleader with a doctorate in criminology from UC Berkeley, will dress as Santa and pull sleds of the boxed and wrapped suits into Delancey's gathering hall. In years past, after watching the uncomfortable newcomers try to slip away to be in private with their foreign gifts, she now insists residents model their new clothes on the spot. The suits have to fit, and they have to be in textures, shades and designs that make the wearer feel good.

"Everyone says, 'Ooooh, aaaaah!' as you turn around," said resident Robert McCormick, 30, who experienced his first Christmas at Delancey in 2008. "It's an amazing feeling. I finally felt what it must be like to have a family." Going from rags to Brooks Bros. was such an uplifting experience for Sean Cronk, 34, that he can't contain his tears remembering it. "All of a sudden people perceived me differently," he said. Once, while at a hospital, the staff mistook him for a doctor. That moment of respect left a lasting mark on his soul. Derek Wilson, who works as a maitre'd at the Delancey Street Restaurant, has only one dark blue suit. He wears it to work every day. "I'm blessed for other things I have in my life – for being able to show others that you can change – that's worth more to me than a lot of nice clothes," he said.

Suits for the new job

Silbert, who has assembled a wardrobe crew to go through everyone's closet to inventory their clothes, made a note to make sure Wilson gets several suits for his new job. Every year, manufacturers send boxes of donated clothes to Delancey Street. Much of it is returned suits that have already been tailored – from upscale designers such as Kenneth Cole, Ermenegildo Zegna and Patrick James.

Silbert keeps personality in mind when assembling wardrobes. The flashier ties with swirling colors will go to those willing to wear them, but not to those who actually want to show off in them. She'll pick outfits just on the edge of someone's attitude – to push them to be a bit bolder, or to teach them a bit more humility.

"Mimi teaches the principles of Christmas – that it's about giving," said former resident Mike DeLane, a San Francisco fire captain. "She's like the mother nobody around here ever had." For Cronk, it isn't about the stuff in the box. "It's about being in that room on Christmas, to finally actually feel loved by people who are going to go through the hard time with you and truly love you no matter what," he said.

The way Silbert sees it, everyone at Delancey is an immigrant to mainstream society, just like her parents who fled Eastern Europe to escape the Nazis during World War II. They settled on Delancey Street in New York, pooled their money and eventually moved to a better flat in Boston, where Silbert grew up learning to share resources with her extended family.

"We did whatever we could to make it up and into the American mainstream," she said. "But we had to do it together."