Would you please w

Mimi S

A major new player surfaces on the San Francisco scene as a 46-year-old woman makes a success of her runaway mate's drug rehabilitation empire. A report by CAROL POGASH:

The diminutive Mimi Silbert does something out of character: She pauses. She's standing beside her $30 million housing and shopping development, under construction hard by the Bay. At 46, her face is so striking it draws attention to itself even in repose. Her rusty brown hair has an agenda all its own. Her tanned skin belies the hours she spends as president and CEO of the Delancey Street Foundation.

As she talks, blue eyes flash, arms windmill and listeners succumb. The apartments are being built by and for former druggies, criminals and the unemployables from the Delancey Street Foundation.

"Let me show you an apartment," Mimi says to a pair of U.S. Justice Department officials. "You might want to screw up your lives and live here." She laughs. She gestures toward the spot where there will be fountains, pool, health club, screening room and tiled piazza for Delancey Street residents. Out front, Delancey Street is building a huge restaurant, cleaners, shoe repair shop, deli, fish and vegetable market, all the services that residents of the new neighborhood of South Park, just south of the Bay Bridge, will need.

The guys from Justice are impressed. They want Delancey Street to become a model for federal rehab programs. One of the them chides Mimi. He says he bet three or four years ago she never envisioned this miracle of a project. "Yes I did,"

Photographs by Kim Komenich

Mimi Silbert is leading the Delancey Street Foundation into a new era. Carol Pogash reports on the drug rehabilitation program and its dynamic leader.

elcome ilbert

Mimi says, "There was no question in my mind."

When she learned it would be too expensive to buy Lone Mountain College or the Claremont Hotel, she decided Delancey Street would build its new home. A few problems arose on the way to Mimi's dream. A state tidelands law, written by her good friend Assemblyman John Burton, preserved the plot of land on which she wanted to build for maritime use. Building housing on the property was forbidden. The State Lands Commission had no plans to grant any exemptions. With help from Burton and Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, Mimi had a law passed permitting Delancey to build.

Her plumbers, electricians and pile drivers are people with experience mostly as thieves, murderers, and unskilled dope fiends. Abe Irizarry, the Delancey Street labor foreman, did have some experience: he helped pour the concrete for the handball court at San Quentin. She convinced the laborers, carpenters and all the unions to send a few skilled workers to train selected Delancey Street members, who would in turn teach other members.

"I never met a human being who doesn't think what we're doing is wonderful," Mimi said. "People just prefer it be done in another neighborhood."

Yet she was able to persuade developers on either

Mimi runs Delancey Street from her elaborate desk . . .

. . . and from the wheel of a bulldozer.

side of Embarcadero Triangle, as the new Delancey Street project is called, that recovering drug addicts make the best of neighbors. "I'm worried about your people," she told them. Who else could guarantee a drug-free environment?

She persuaded the Bank of America to give a $10 million unsecured loan. The officers who made the deal got a standing ovation at the Delancey Street Seder last spring. "The place went wild," said Sarah Griffen, a BofA vice president. "It was the first time anyone ever publicly thanked me for lending them money."

At a love fest press conference, BofA chairman Tom Clausen likened it to BofA's financing of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Hollywood film industry and California agriculture.

"It's really like a miracle to me," Mimi said.

"She's Mother Teresa," says developer Al Wilsey, who gave the project its first $100,000.

She is, observed Assemblyman Burton, "dynamite."

"Ninety-nine percent of real estate developers would have taken their losses and licked their wounds and gone home," says commercial broker Rick Mariano, a Delancey Street graduate, a board member and son-in-law to former Mayor Dianne Feinstein. Mimi succeeded, he said, "with no particular wizardry but with resolve."

"I don't stop," Mimi said. "We had to centralize and expand or slowly see the death process."

Delancey Street takes drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, violent felons and people who for whatever reason have hit bottom. "At Delancey Street it doesn't matter to us what you've done. Our criteria," Mimi said, "is that you want to change badly enough. We take people everybody thinks are losers. Then, with no experience, no funding, just these losers themselves, we develop their strengths," she said.

By learning various trades, acquiring an education and by teaching others, those who have always been powerless are given power. They do charitable works, "to balance the scales so that one day they can live with themselves," Mimi said. And they learn to have fun. After four years, she said, a member's life is so rich that "he's not willing to throw it away for some stupid drug."

So successful has the program become that it turns down 90 percent of its applicants, a situation Mimi finds intolerable. "Taking in desperate people is what we do," Mimi said. Delancey Street is based on a system of one member teaching another. Without the influx of new recruits, Mimi says, Delancey Street would die.

The 300 San Francisco Delancey Street members are squished into two facilities: the Pacific Heights mansion that serves as its headquarters and will not be sold even after the move to the Embarcadero Triangle, and "The Club," at Fulton and Eighth Avenue. The Embarcadero Triangle will allow what Mimi calls "The Delancey Street family" to live together and double its local membership.

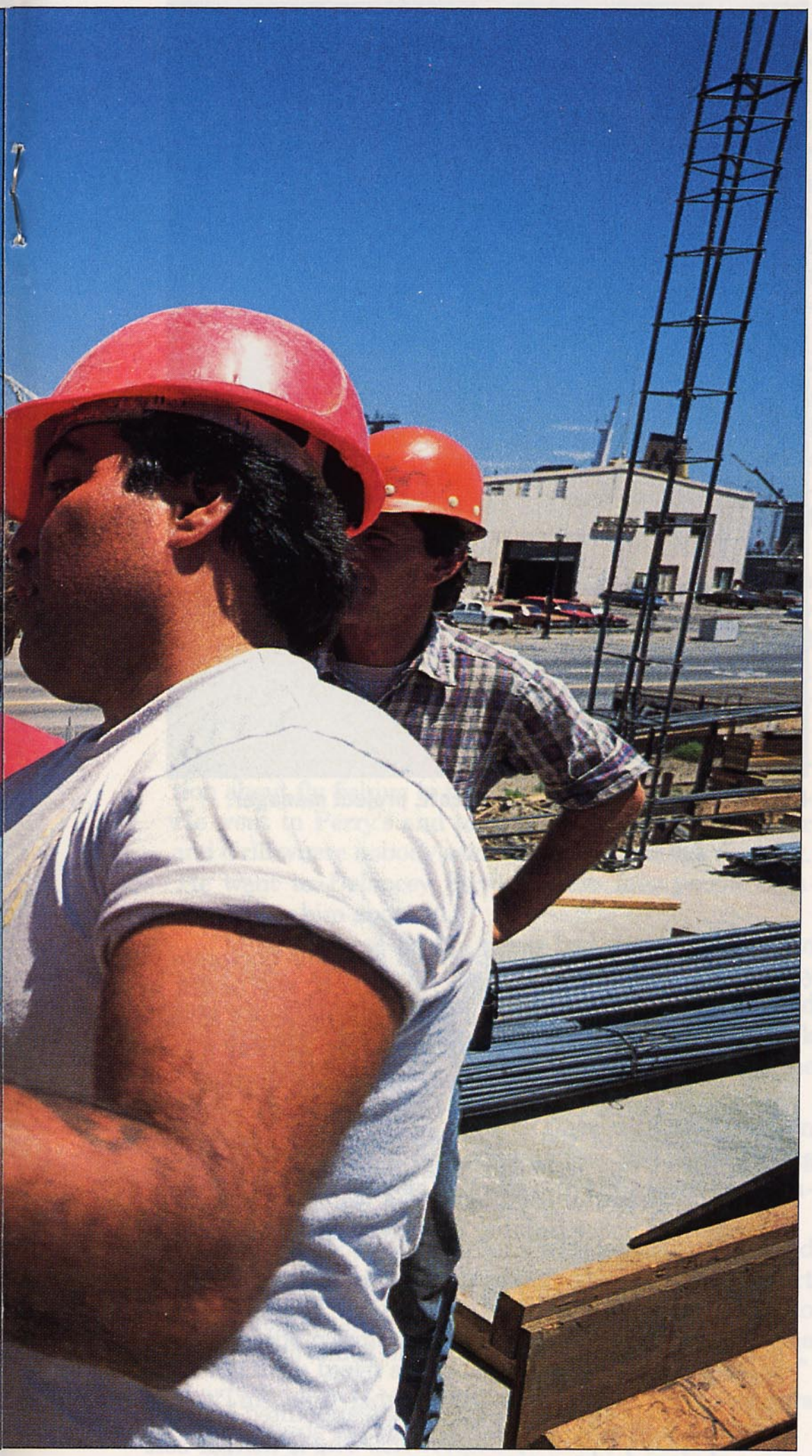
From the beginning, some 17 years ago, Mimi eschewed all government grants forever. Handouts, she contends,

Mimi and Delancey Street members-turned-construction workers on the job at her $30 million South Park project.

encourage dependency. Delancey Street would be self-sufficient. At Delancey Street Mimi proved to be a charismatic. All her life Mimi had been good, yet she somehow acquired street smarts as well. It was Mimi, Delancey Street members say, who designed the programs.

She has helped some 8,000 to 10,000 people turn their lives around.

" Throughout" said journalist and PR woman Melba Beals, a longtime Delancey Street supporter, Mimi never stopped being "Mama Mimi, the yin and yang of Delancey Street."



"Fortunately, for someone under five feet, Mimi is bigger than life." said San Francisco Supervisor and former Delancey Street resident Bill Maher.

She has important friends, and she's friends with cops and sheriffs. Former Mayor Feinstein and Mayor Agnos both are big boosters. If she chose, Mimi could attend nearly every party that counts in the city. Rarely does she attend dinner parties. Her idea of a social event outside Delancey Street is a cup of coffee with a heart-to-heart.

Delancey Street is her life work. Now that her sons are in college there is nearly no Mimi outside Delancey Street. Yet her life has its desserts. There are the incalculable rewards of helping people thought to be hopeless. She receives worldwide recognition.

Delancey Street is based on a system of role models. Mimi is the ultimate role model. Clearly, she is adored. When she sits, someone almost always rushes in with an antique cup filled with tea. Stationed at her long work table like a pen and blotter is a plate of thickly sliced chocolate, lemon and layer cake made by Delancey Street members. The servings are for guests and for Mimi. A slice devoured quickly is replaced. Some days, Mimi eats the equivalent of an entire cake.

Mimi rides around in a black Dodge 600ES convertible with her ball of fluff mutt who accompanies her nearly everywhere. As with all Delancey Street members, she dresses well. Their clothes are donated by such top stores and manufacturers as Gloria Vanderbilt, The Limited, Emporium-Capwell and Ralph Lauren. "Mimi is a combination of strength and vulnerability and of wisdom and goofiness," says her old friend Susan Margolis, a New York magazine editor.

And it is true that responsible as Mimi is, there remains a playful, childlike part: "I definitely feel like a kid," Mimi says. "I don't take myself too seriously. I still bump into things. I spill my food. I have no patience with regulations. I don't understand bureaucracies. I eat Cracker Jacks in the morning. I think grownups are people who stand in line easily. When unfair things happen, they sigh. Injustice makes me a crazy person."

Daily, Mimi receives The Letters: "I have watched helplessly as my brother's life slowly drains from his very being. . ." "When not high on drugs, my husband is a caring, loving father. . ." "I thought maybe here was a place that could help our son. . ."

Stopping by to pick up her stack of pink telephone messages, Mimi reads a note from a Delancey Street member who walked off the Christmas tree lot after eight months in the program. (Twenty-five percent who begin do not complete their stay.) He wants to return. Mimi considers his case for maybe a minute before crumbling and tossing the note. "Nope," she says. "No room."

She seems to make life-and-death decisions with everyday ease. But she says, "It's just horrible. I hate it."

The White House makes it sound so simple with its embarrassing campaign to "Just Say No." Meanwhile, various branches of the federal government beseech Mimi for help. Recently, she's been asked to take on the Cuban Mariel prisoners.

One of the most successful drug treatment program in the country, Delancey Street does not treat addiction. Asked to kick drugs before coming, some members arrive still high. "You can kick heroin like a bad flu on our living room couch with a lot of chicken soup and a lot of love," Mimi says. "As soon as you're slightly bleary-eyed we'll stand you up, put a broom in your hands and try to get

you to function."

Delancey Street teaches how to have a life.

"I was really lucky in the draw," Mimi says. "I had two of the most loving, supportive parents." Raised just outside Boston, she was the only child of Dena and Herbert Halper. Both parents "had a deep sense of justice," Mimi recalls.

Always, there were loving relatives at home. Mimi remembers that before dinner, the family "would sit around the radio and discuss the news of the day." When they heard a story about "three kids ripping off a lady," her parents would "in one sentence go from saying 'Imagine, that poor little lady,' to 'Imagine how miserable those kids' lives must be to steal from a little old lady.' "

Her father owned and operated a corner drugstore, where Mimi excelled as a soda jerk, specializing in mocha shakes. She still relishes a daily hot fudge sundae.

"I remember some old and poor people coming in. My father would say 'When they go to buy something, put it in a large bag and when they go to the cash register, turn around and don't look.' " Once, she turned around and saw one of the old people dumping an aspirin bottle into his bag. She said " 'Daddy, I think so-and-so is taking something.' He got very angry. He said, 'I told you not to look. So-and-so needs those things. Something is very wrong when he can't buy it. We don't want him to feel he's taking charity...You're not to turn around again because you're not to make him feel bad.' "

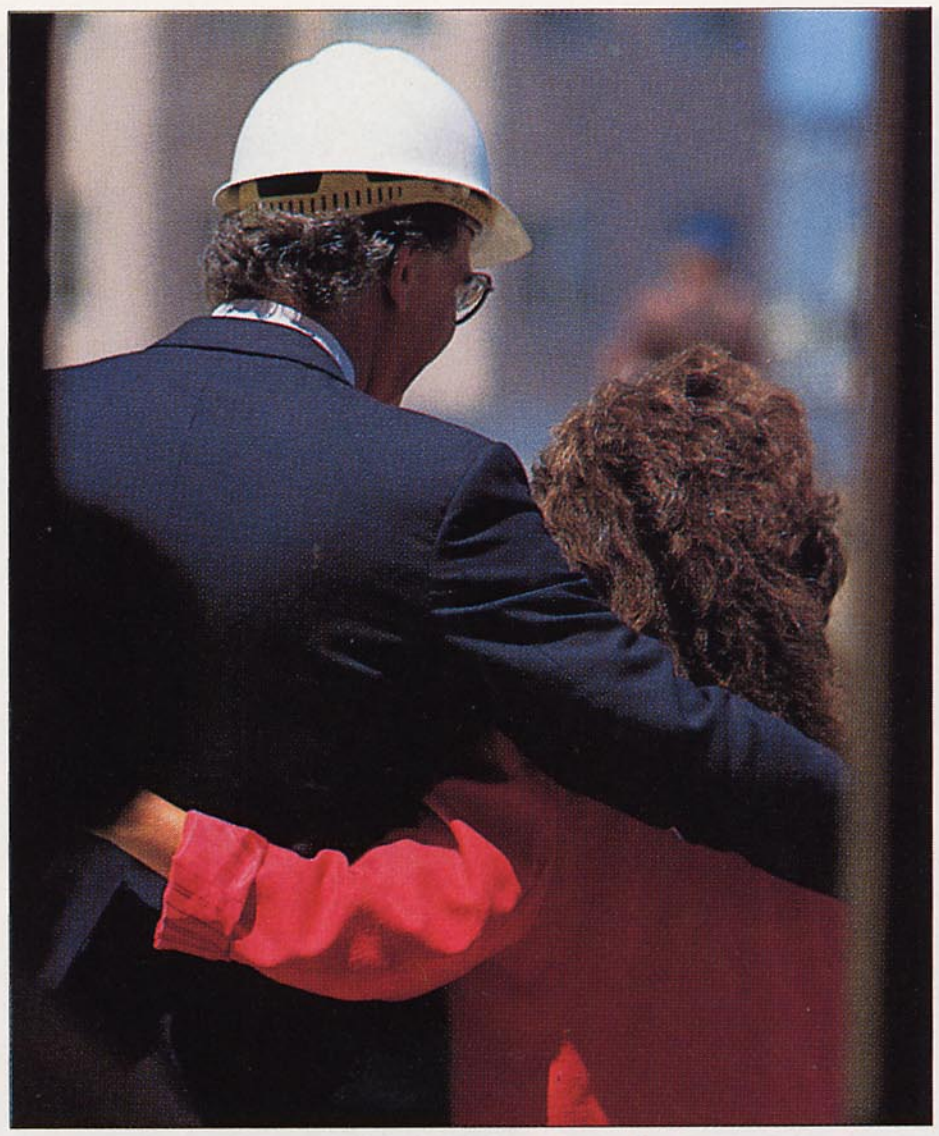
At Seder, a holiday usually reserved for family members, her father would invite poor strangers to their dinner table.

In high school, Mimi became a cheerleader—a cheerleader who read Dostoyevsky when she wasn't doing flips. Voted "nicest girl" in her high school class, she found it so humiliating that "right afterwards, I remember teaching myself how to swear." While still in high school she began helping kids in trouble.

At the University of Massachusetts, she continued her mission: "I went to a local drugstore to get an ice cream sundae. I found a kid who hung around there who clearly should have been in school. I started talking to him and sure enough, he was cutting school. I slowly worked with him. I figured out what was wrong. I brought him back to school, went to see his family and patched things up. There was a lot of hostility going on in the house. No one even knew he had dropped out of school." Some years later, Mimi's dropout graduated from MIT.

"Everybody was saying, 'You're so wonderful.' I felt terrific because I was always helping people. One day it struck me that everybody should feel that way. No one should be in the position of only receiving. That would tend to make you violent and depressed or give you a victim's view of life."

After college, Mimi studied in Paris under Jean-Paul Sartre. From the existentialist she learned "that there is no given meaning to life. That you have to make that meaning and that is a tremendous anxiety..."



Personal touch: Mimi with Jack Scott, project manager.

At UC-Berkeley, Mimi earned a double doctorate in psychology and criminology. Afterwards, she taught at Berkeley and San Francisco State. She became a consultant to prisons, mental health programs, halfway houses and police departments. Dick Klapp, the former San Francisco Police Department training manager and officer in charge of the police academy remembers their meeting: "I was resentful. I sat down across the table from this beautiful little blue-eyed woman. I said, 'I've only been in police training 12 years. Tell me all about it. And so she did."

Together, he said, "we started a whole new era of training." Delancey Street members helped in role-playing scenarios. "They brought some experience to that," he jokes.

A few years ago, Gov. Deukmejian appointed Mimi to the California Board of Corrections. She is neither soft nor hard on crime. Imprisoning criminals "at someone else's expense, providing all their food and lodging and letting them sit there with no responsibility is absurd," she says. She's equally opposed to the folks who are soft on crime. "If you care about people," she says, "you hold them accountable.

"If my parents were cloned out," Mimi says, "That would put an end to Delancey Street." She does for her people what her parents did for her: provides a loving, yet strict environment with a lot of education.

It takes four years, "just like Harvard," Mimi says,

and includes "a semester abroad." Abroad in this case means any of the other Delancey Street homes in upstate New York, Santa Monica, North Carolina or New Mexico. There are 700 Delancey Street members nationwide.

Its functionally illiterate members earn their high school equivalency diplomas. As soon as someone starts reading at an eighth grade level he starts teaching someone else who's at the fifth grade level. Many pursue specific interests such as Euclidian geometry, the great books, art appreciation or music history, all member-taught courses.

Some of Mimi's famous friends teach courses. Attorney Patrick Hallinan took Delancey Street members on an archeological dig to the Yucatan Peninsula. Vidal Sassoon, another good friend, put several Delancey Street members through his beauty courses. Other Delancey Street members go on to acquire law degrees and real estate licenses.

Under Mimi's tutelege, members are taught how to order at Chinese, French and Italian restaurants. They visit art museums and are taken to plays. "They should learn to feel comfortable in the world of the middle class. They may not like it, but they have to know it before they reject it," Mimi says.

Dugald Stermer remembers when he had an illustration about fly fishing in the *New York Times Magazine*. He went to Perry's and to the Washington Square Bar and Grill where nobody said anything about his drawing. He went to Delancey Street, where four people commented to him about it.

"Most of these people never had a safe moment in their lives," says Melba Beals. "Mimi provides that safety and that love with picnics and movies and fun trips and dinners together and studying and learning the work ethic—all those things you would have learned in the right family, she simply provides it."

Mimi says she's just infusing them with all-American values: "You don't feel good unless you earn feeling good." Delancey Street, she says, "is just a large, old-fashioned extended family."

"A lot of people walk around with buckets of love and are rendered fairly ineffective," says Superior Court Judge Daniel Weinstein. "Mimi has the attachment to people, the warmth and the empathy and she has the ability to be tough and to make people be accountable."

"This elfin lady controls men who are murderers where guards in prison could not," says Melba Beals.

Through its various enterprises, which include a moving company, college logo items, stained glass, woodwork and catering, Delancey Street turned a profit of $2.4 million last year.

Few people in San Francisco are as well-connected as Mimi. Seated at her long, antique table are two of Delancey Street's friends: Judge Weinstein and deputy district attorney Katherine Feinstein. Danny Weinstein's father, a rabbi, conducted the first Seder at Delancey Street. The daughter of former Mayor Dianne Feinstein, Katherine is married to Rick Mariano, the successful commercial downtown broker and Delancey Street grad.

They're working out plans for a small summer camp for troubled youth—for this summer.

Because she keeps such long hours, it takes three Delancey Street secretaries working in shifts until 10 many nights to attend to her paperwork and calls. "She's got ten brains, all of them operating independently of one another," says Embarcadero Triangle project manager Jack Scott.

During the morning, Mimi fields a call from Governor Deukmejian's office. A bunch of kids is marching across America protesting child abuse. They're arriving in San Francisco in a few minutes, the governor's aide says, and need some place to shower.

No problem. Mimi calls "The Club." She's also extended an invitation for lunch. The voice on the other end asks, "When are they coming?"

"Now," Mimi laughs.

Then, she takes an hour-long telephone interview from a drug conference in Bogota, Colombia. Even in translation, her charisma seems to reach. Although there's no TV satellite hookup, she talks with her arms and her whole body.

Mimi accepts the love of Delancey Street members but she tries to counter any idolization. At the construction site she singlehandedly demolished the last building from the controls of a bulldozer. She tied rebar, helped drive the piles, did a little form work and is going to do some of the woodwork. "I would feel horrible if all I did was sit distantly at the top," she explains.

There are those who say Delancey Street is an experiment that could not be repeated without her. Mimi disagrees. "The process is definitely bigger than any of us. Delancey Street has been built by the residents who have come through it, each person putting on another brick." ■

Carol Pogash is an Examiner *writer.*