

MIMI SILBERT, her eyes sparkling, is the very picture of pride. "Isn't it wonderful!" she shouts. Her arms spread wide as if to embrace the three-acre complex taking shape along San Francisco's waterfront.

John agrees. Five years ago, he was busted for sale and possession of narcotics. Now he is the general contractor in charge of a \$30-million venture—building 177 apartments, a 150-car garage, 60,000 square feet of retail stores, a theater and a restaurant.

Even as the hammers bang away, the project's finance staff is working the phones. Freddie, a 27-year-old former thief, pusher and junkie, solicits donations for a fountain and pool. Steve, an ex-addict, tries to find steel roofing beams. Diane, once a jewelry thief, cajoles a manufacturer into donating wooden windows.

This unlikeliest of crews is pursuing a labor of love, raising yet another site for the program that salvaged their lives: the Delancey Street Foundation.

IN 1972 a former heroin addict named John Maher approached criminologist Mimi Silbert of the

Delancey Street's Road to Success



**This innovative
rehabilitation program
is run by ex-cons for
ex-cons. And it
works!**

BY CAROLYN MALES AND
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University of California at Berkeley. Maher wanted to develop a rehabilitation program "run by ex-cons for ex-cons." Traditional criminal-rehab programs just don't work, he argued. It takes an ex-addict to understand the gut-wrenching pain of quitting heroin cold turkey, the misery of shivering in an alley on a winter night, the wasted hours behind prison walls. It takes an ex-con to see through all the sob stories, the excuses for wrongdoing.

Silbert and Maher discussed the possibility of ex-cons and addicts not only living together, helping one another get off drugs, but also teaching one another how to get a high-school diploma or college degree, learn a legitimate trade, hold a job and, most important, develop self-esteem. The organization would be run like a family. Residents who'd been in the program the longest would guide and discipline the newer arrivals, who in turn would do the same for the next residents. Rather than depend on government handouts, participants would earn their keep, becoming hard-working, tax-paying citizens.

Thus was born a center for drug and alcohol treatment, criminal rehabilitation and vocational training. Mimi Silbert and John Maher

became co-presidents, with Silbert taking over the entire operation in 1984. Today there are 800 Delancey Street residents in San Francisco and four other locations: Los Angeles; San Juan Pueblo, N.M.; Brewster, N.Y.; and Greensboro, N.C.

"You're Wasting Our Time." The foundation took its name from Delancey Street on New York City's Lower East Side, which at the turn of the century was the first home in America for many European immigrants. With special poignancy, Delancey Street newcomers are themselves called "immigrants." Like those who have made the trek to America from distant lands, Delancey Street residents must learn to adapt to our society. Silbert says, "We take people who don't know how to live in America—whether they're loaded on drugs or have been in prison most of their lives."

David, a heroin addict, climbed aboard a nightmarish merry-go-round of getting high, looking for the next fix and burglarizing to get cash for drugs. Finally he landed in jail. "I was so desperate," he remembers, "that I almost wanted to be busted."

Grasping at any hope, the 28-year old inmate at Santa Rita, a California jail, wrote a letter to Delancey Street begging to be accepted there as an alternative to his prison sentence.

A few weeks later, he arrived in shabby jeans and a T-shirt for an interview with four Delancey

Street residents. "Why have you come here?" they asked. David looked up at the confident men in suits and ties and thought about all the changes he'd have to make to be like them. Scared, he blurted out, "I really don't want to be here." The men's faces darkened. "You're wasting our time," they said, sending him outside to think things over.

As he stood on the sidewalk, David feared that he'd just blown the last chance to salvage his life. By the time he was called back in, David knew he wanted to stay.

Some would-be immigrants are paroled to Delancey Street. Others are sent there on probation or in lieu of prison. Yet all must personally request admittance. No one—not even a judge—can assure their acceptance.

Duck Walk. The residents stay an average of four years, soaking up an education that spans vocational, cultural and social training. In the Delancey Street school, the "professors" are the reformed convicts and junkies, as well as outside volunteers. In addition to the academic program, there are thrice-weekly rap sessions and the daily routine of work, meetings and seminars.

"People who would be considered patients elsewhere are in charge here," says Silbert. They learn to help one another—staying up all night with a buddy who's wrestling an urge to go back on drugs, encouraging a shy resident

to talk about his feelings, insisting that a new Delancey Street employee who's never held a nine-to-five job show up on time for work.

Until their final year, when residents go out into the job market, they work at Delancey Street-owned enterprises, putting in a stint in each of three areas: sales, manual labor and office work. As a result, they develop various skills, giving them employment options.

Like all newcomers, David began at the bottom, scrubbing floors and toilets. Eventually he worked his way up to better jobs, earned college credits and his journeyman's papers in carpentry. He also learned such basics as good grooming, proper speech and table manners. If you look good, goes the Delancey Street philosophy, others will treat you well, and you will feel better about yourself. As Mimi Silbert puts it, "If it walks like a duck, eventually it becomes a duck."

Today David is a carpenter and happily married. "If it wasn't for Delancey Street," he says somberly, "I'd probably be in prison or on the street using drugs—or dead."

Creating Trust. Getting through Delancey Street, residents say, is even harder than surviving prison. "In jail you're responsible for nothing—at Delancey Street, you're responsible for everything you do," Silbert says. "It doesn't matter why you were an addict or a burglar. What matters is that you believe in your ability to change all that."

At age 11, Sonny had begun

shoplifting. By 14, he was smoking marijuana and pushing pills. At 18, he discovered the hard stuff—heroin and cocaine. Eventually he was busted for grand theft and attempted murder and sent to San Quentin—where a fellow inmate told him about Delancey Street. "I need help," Sonny wrote to the program.

He stayed at Delancey Street for ten years, working in various training projects, including the automotive center, and handling money for all Delancey Street enterprises. "I'd never had a job, never had a credit card, but they trusted me," he says, still amazed. Now Sonny is a construction worker in San Francisco.

A Real Family. Over the past 17 years, more than 5000 former addicts and felons have graduated from Delancey Street. They've bought homes and reared families. They've become firefighters, electricians, mechanics, construction workers, teachers, lawyers, police officers, business owners and, not surprisingly, counselors and criminologists.

The majority entering the program have never held a skilled job for more than a few months. Over 85 percent have used heroin for more than ten years. One-quarter are women; half are minorities; most are illiterate. All are hard-core felons—burglars, car thieves, armed robbers, pushers, prostitutes, even murderers. Only sex offenders are not welcome.

The ex-cons don't do an about-face overnight, and one-quarter drop out, Silbert concedes. The

choice is theirs. "There are ten people waiting for each bed," she points out. But for those who stay, Delancey Street becomes a nurturing family.

Good Neighbors. In the early days of Delancey Street, the first few ex-cons crowded into one apartment. By late 1972, Delancey Street numbered about 100 and needed space. Silbert wanted her residents far from the underworld of pushers and prostitutes. While the group scrimped and saved, she and Maher came up with a find: the magnificent old Russian consulate in San Francisco's fashionable Pacific Heights area. Delancey Street bought the mansion for \$160,000, with a small down payment and a big mortgage.

The renovation of "Russia," as the residents dubbed the building, became a hallmark of the Delancey Street way. Ex-cons who initially knew nothing about fixing up houses took on the task themselves, stripping wood, nailing molding, repairing plaster. Today the refurbished building is worth \$4 million.

Sprucing up the mansion fostered good will in the surrounding community—but not enough. To gain greater acceptance, the residents of Delancey Street provided a service they were uniquely qualified to offer: a community watch, patrolling the hilly streets of the area to thwart would-be burglars, muggers and other undesirables.

Meanwhile, they had to find a way to support their own growing

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population. The answer came to Silbert one day when the Delancey Street cadre was moving furniture at a neighbor's house for a ballet benefit. Watching her muscular, iron-pumping felons at work, she suddenly smiled. "That's it. We'll start a moving company."

Today, 15 years later, Delancey Street Movers has a fleet of 35 trucks, and the foundation has branched out into other commercial ventures, such as catering, furniture design, and transportation services for senior citizens and the handicapped. All managed and staffed by Delancey Street's ex-cons and former druggies, the businesses net \$1.9 million a year.

Fresh Challenges. All these services keep Delancey Street funded—and save the public a bundle. "It costs us less than \$10,000 a year to house and feed a person at Delancey Street," Silbert says. "That's half the price of holding someone in jail. And we don't use taxpayers' money."

Delancey Street residents also point with pride to their community activism. The ex-cons lead outings to parks and sponsor cookouts for troubled kids. They pick up litter for local cleanup campaigns. In addition, the residents run a food-distribution and bulk-buying service for 60 charitable organizations in the San Francisco area.

Not surprisingly, municipal

leaders sing the praises of Delancey Street. San Francisco police chief Frank M. Jordan says, "Delancey Street is the finest program I know of for rebuilding lives." Adds former San Francisco mayor Dianne Feinstein, "I consider Delancey Street unquestionably the best program available to stop drug abuse and teach our young people how to lead successful lives."

With so much success, Delancey Street could rest on its laurels. But guided by Mimi Silbert, the organization seeks out new challenges. In New Mexico, it has done the unheard-of by taking in juvenile offenders as young as 12 and training them alongside adult ex-cons. Carol Kizziah, consultant to the Criminal Justice Agency for Contra Costa County in California, calls the New Mexico project "a model for juvenile-justice programs." This willingness to try new things is behind the construction of the eight-building complex along San Francisco's waterfront. Due to be completed this fall, it will enable Delancey Street to take in hundreds more. And for Silbert, giving more "immigrants" a chance at a better life is what it's all about.

"It doesn't take an enormous amount of money to make change possible," says Silbert. "It takes a sense of values and a vision—and people believing in one another."