

Stressing mutual support, self-discipline and responsibility, Mimi Silbert's Delancey Street program turns hardcore criminals into upstanding citizens.

Hitting Bottom Can Be The Beginning

IN HIS TEENS, ROBERT ROCHA was selling drugs night and day to survive. He was a street kid in San Francisco—using and pushing heroin, sleeping wherever he could. His mother had been in and out of jail for robbing banks ever since he could remember, he says. He had been sent to foster homes from the age of 8. He lived on the edge, hustling and stealing.

Rocha carried a gun to pull holdups. He stabbed people too; and while still a juvenile, he was arrested and charged with 27 armed robberies.

His dream, to go to a big-time prison, came true at age 19, when he was sent to San Quentin. "I'd lost touch with everything," Rocha says, "and had no belief in myself. No hope. No trust in nothing or nobody. The reason I wanted to go to prison was because that's where I could be somebody. But when I got there, nothing in prison excited me, because I'd done everything by then. When I got back out on the street, I thought about changing my life. Then I got busted again—for selling heroin to an undercover cop."

That was in 1987. Today, at 26, the same young man is well-groomed, wears a business suit and carries himself with quiet pride. He has the warm, confident smile of a person with solid ground under his feet along with a future. In the four years since he went on parole, he has learned eight construction trades. He takes college courses in criminology. He tutors other ex-convicts in geometry, helping them earn high school diplomas. He has transformed his life on every level—not in some magical way, but through a painful process of taking one small step after another.

Robert Rocha is one of 10,000 men and women with similar stories of tragedy and triumph. Over the last two decades, these former felons, drug abusers and prostitutes have helped each other survive to become healthy, productive citizens. Each of them has spent an average of four years as part of the Delancey Street Foundation, based in San Francisco, which has received worldwide acclaim for its ability to mend

Delancey Street's founder, Mimi Silbert, with the residents (l-r) Conrad Laran, Robert Greenaway, John Ridley and Abe Irizarry at the Embarcadero Triangle complex in San Francisco. The residential as well as commercial center, built almost entirely by residents, houses Delancey Street-run ventures and other businesses.



B Y H A N K W H I T T E M O R E

even the most broken of lives.

At the heart of this unique "extended family" is the spirit and unswerving resolve of Dr. Mimi Silbert, 49, a criminologist who has dedicated her life since 1972 to keeping Delancey Street open and growing. An elfin woman weighing less than 100 pounds, she stands toe-to-toe with the meanest, toughest ex-felons until the shouting turns to laughter, tears and hard work, and deep wounds gradually heal.

"You want to quit?" she challenged Robert Rocha and other Delancey Street residents while they were building their new San Francisco complex on the waterfront. Despite their lack of experience, they were doing the job by themselves. "Well," Silbert told them, "that's what you've always done—given up every time it has gotten difficult! I know you're hammering away and thinking that this isn't worth it, but you're hammering away on your lives."

"You're building your own foundation. If you make a mistake with that wall, tear it down and rebuild it! That's what we're doing at Delancey Street, for ourselves—tearing down bad things and making good things to replace 'em. And if you're too guilty and angry and hopeless to fight for yourself, then do it for the next guy. Because he's counting on you. Meanwhile, you're learning new skills. You're getting something that nobody can take away from you. You're building your lives."

There are 500 current residents at the San Francisco complex that opened in late 1990. About 500 others are going through this same rigorous program in Brewster, N.Y.; in Greensboro, N.C.; and in San Juan Pueblo, N.M. With neither funding nor a permanent staff other than Silbert herself, Delancey Street is almost entirely self-supporting. Its business enterprises, run by residents, net \$3 million a year.

"We're trying to prove that the 'losers' in our society can, in fact, be helped," Silbert says, "and also that they, in turn, can help. Essentially they make up an underclass. A third of our population was homeless. The average resident is four or five generations into poverty and two or three generations into prison. They've been hard-core dope fiends. They're unskilled and functionally illiterate. They've had horrible violence done to them, and they've been violent."

"Most people would rather see them locked up for the rest of their lives, but our point is the opposite—that they can be taught to help themselves. They can learn to be responsible and self-reliant. And we believe that helping these same people is a critical part of turning around all the rest of society."

Last fall Silbert was among six recipients of the second annual America's Awards, sponsored by the Positive Thinking Foundation, of which Dr. Norman Vincent Peale is co-founder. "These

unsung heroes personify the American character and spirit," Dr. Peale says. "They are ordinary people who are extraordinary examples of values that make our country great."

Over the years, Silbert has been besieged by requests from groups around the country wanting to learn about Delancey Street in order to duplicate it. Now, with typically large vision, she plans to create a "training institute" that would include up to several months of internship. Delancey Street could become a model for the nation.

"There's no way I'd go back to my old life," says Shirley LaMarr, 43, a resident for nearly three years. "I went through the whole siege of drugs and prostitution, getting beat up and having

guns drawn on me, getting raped and carried out on pills, you name it. I've robbed people, all kinds of stuff, and each year I'd feel more disgusted. I lived on the street, with my own space on the sidewalk. When I was arrested, I sent a letter to Delancey Street. I was at the bottom, with a choice of coming here or going back out to die."

Those who enter Delancey Street invariably are filled with bitterness and despair. Having lost all trust and hope, they are angry and defensive. To be admitted, however, they must go through the motions of writing and asking to be let in.

Although they must promise to stay at least two years, the doors are not locked—so they can leave at any time,



Eddie Adams

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Delancey's body shop. Right, Robert Rocha and Shirley LaMarr: Through "the Street," they transformed their troubled lives.



Eddie Adams

and few believe they will remain longer than a couple of months.

"But we already know that," Silbert says, laughing because the pattern is repeated so often, "and we're up front about it right away. I tell a new person who's scowling at me with utter contempt, 'Hey, we know you're trying to manipulate us. Our job is to out-manip-

ulate you! And we're better at it than you are.'

"They always play the victim: 'It wasn't my fault.' We ask them to explain: 'Somebody tied you down and injected a needle into your arm? Someone forced you to take a gun and bash that old lady on the head? Is that what happened? Who actually did those things?' Finally they admit, 'Well, yeah, it was me. I did it.' We don't care that they don't mean what they say, just as long as they say it. Then we remind them of it every day that they're here!"

New arrivals at Delancey Street are given maintenance chores at the bottom of a long, intricate chain of command that includes every resident. A drug addict who wakes up in the lobby is given a broom to push and told, "Now you're no longer an addict. Why? Because we don't allow drugs in here. So the question for you is how you're going to live your life without drugs."

This "outside-in" approach is central to the Delancey Street process. "Image is important to them, so we start there," Silbert says. "They have to cut their hair, get into a suit and even change the way they walk. We ask them to act as if they were upstanding citizens or successful executives, even though they feel the opposite. Through external imitation, something gets internalized."

The same person also is told to be responsible for the next arrival, and so forth up the tightly structured chain of interaction, based on the premise that people will change simply by "doing" for somebody else.

"For my first eight months here," Robert Rocha remembers, "I didn't believe in anything that Mimi and the others were saying. I had such a hard attitude that nobody could tell me nothing. I'd say, 'Get away from me,' because there was no way that I could trust anybody with my feelings. Nobody had ever cared about me, so why should I care about anyone else?"

"Then one day I saw that one of the guys was going to leave, and I found myself shouting at him. I got hysterical, trying to get him to listen to me. Some people told me, 'Hey, Robert, stop. We've taken care of it. But you know what? You're starting to

care.' And when I realized that it was true—that I did care—I almost broke into tears."

Delancey Street's rules forbid alcohol or drugs and prohibit threatening—much less committing—violence. In two decades, there has never been a violent incident, and the few residents who have

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DELANCEY STREET/continued

made threats were thrown out. Eighty percent have kept their promise to stay at least two years. Graduates, with an average residency of four years, today include attorneys, business people, technocrats, construction workers and others who represent an extraordinary record of transformation.

Mimi Silbert came from an immigrant neighborhood of Boston, where her father ran the corner drugstore. "Delancey Street functions the way my own family did," she says. "I've duplicated here what worked for me in that neighborhood, where everybody looked out for everybody else as we struggled upward. It was like holding hands while climbing a mountain. Together we rise or together we fall. And that's what happens here every day."

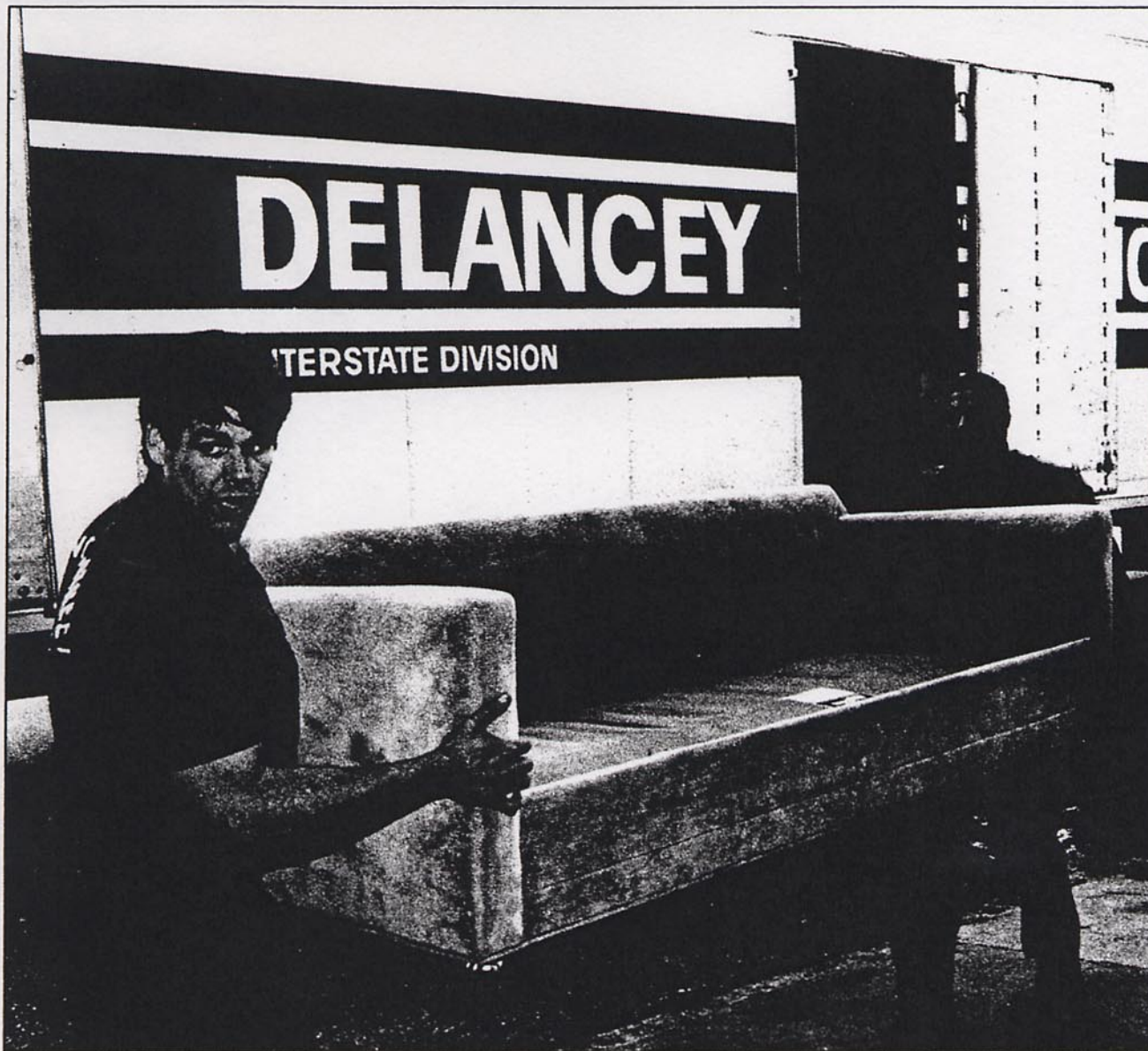
Although her family moved to the Boston suburbs when she was in sixth grade, Mimi Silbert never forgot the supportive structure of that immigrant neighborhood and its values of hard work and self-reliance. A cheerleader who was voted "nicest girl" in the class of 1959 at Brookline High School, Silbert majored in English and psychology at the University of Massachusetts. After that came a doctorate in criminology from the University of California at Berkeley.

"I interned as a prison psychologist," she recalls, "and it was clear to me that this system of punishment doesn't work. The people who wind up there are given everything, all paid for by the taxpayers, and they are responsible for nothing. And then we wonder why, when they come out, they're no different."

Silbert was approached in 1971 by John Maher, a former felon who invited her to join him in creating a center for criminal rehabilitation and vocational training. It would be for ex-cons and run by ex-cons.

When they joined forces, Maher and Silbert agreed on a system of total self-sufficiency. All residents would work to support the group, with no outside funds. They would follow strict rules of behavior and be self-governing. Each resident would develop at least three marketable skills as well as earn a high school equivalency diploma.

Named for the section of New York City's Lower East Side where immigrants congregated at the turn of the century, Delancey Street started with four addicts in a San Francisco apartment. By late 1972, about 100 former felons were jammed into that single space. Yet, by helping each other, and by working and pooling their incomes, they were able to buy an old mansion—formerly



Delancey Street Foundation businesses, among them a moving company, net \$3 million a year and keep the program almost entirely self-sufficient. Here, Zane Sinnott (l) and Fleunoy Hampton are on the job.

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housing the Soviet consulate—in fashionable Pacific Heights.

Silbert and Maher fell in love. "We shared a life and a dream," she says. For a decade, as their work continued to gain recognition, Maher helped Silbert raise

her twin sons from an early marriage. However, personal problems took up more and more of Maher's time, and he resigned from Delancey Street in 1984. Four years later, at age 48, he died of a heart attack.

Since then Mimi Silbert has emerged not only as the driving force behind Delancey Street's continued success but also as a leader. One testament to her drive and ability is the foundation's new Italian-style complex in San Francisco. Because it was constructed almost entirely by the residents, the spacious complex—assessed at \$30 million—cost only half that figure to build.

Called the Embarcadero Triangle, it contains 177 apartments, along with meeting rooms, a movie theater, a swimming pool and space for some businesses—such as printing, picture-framing and catering—run by residents. At street level is an upscale restaurant, also operated solely by Delancey Street people, and Silbert is now getting major businesses to set up discount retail stores, which residents will learn to run.

Meanwhile she has begun a new alliance with the California Department of Corrections, through which Delancey Street people are interviewing San Quentin prisoners before their release. The purpose is to give them alternatives

to going directly back out on the street, including the option of entering Delancey Street itself—before, instead of after, they hit rock bottom.

Aside from the new programs and businesses, daily life at Delancey Street continues at an intense pace. Activities include frequent "games" held for residents to develop their interpersonal skills. For those at the one-year mark, there are marathon sessions called "dissipations" to help them get rid of the tremendous guilt over what they did in the past. And a final area of education involves volunteer community or social work, with residents engaged in numerous projects, from helping the elderly to working with young people in poor neighborhoods.

"We're coming together to make things happen," Silbert says, "not just with good results but also with a good process. Because life itself is a process. If you fall apart, it doesn't have to end there. Hitting bottom can be the beginning. And I think, right now, that America itself has the same problem that brings people to Delancey Street.

"At one time, we all believed we were going up as a country, but now we've started to feel like losers. There's a sense of

being powerless, an attitude of fear and distrust. We're on the way down. Maybe we have to hit bottom before we can wake up the spirit of hope in America. But there's tremendous good in being able to get excited that rebuilding is possible. Once you know it's possible, you can take the risk of starting again. Then the best part of life is the struggle." ■

For further information, write to: Delancey Street Foundation, Dept. P, 600 Embarcadero St., San Francisco, Calif. 94107.

Know an Unsung Hero?

Mimi Silbert was among 1520 candidates nominated by the public for a 1991 America's Award. The awards, presented annually to six "ordinary" people who are extraordinary role models, carry a \$5000 prize from the Positive Thinking Foundation. Deadline for nominations for the 1992 award is April 30. Send nominations, preferably in the form of a newspaper or magazine article, to: America's Awards, Dept. P, 66 E. Main St., Pawling, N.Y. 12564.

If you nominate someone, you will receive a free booklet featuring stories about last year's winners.