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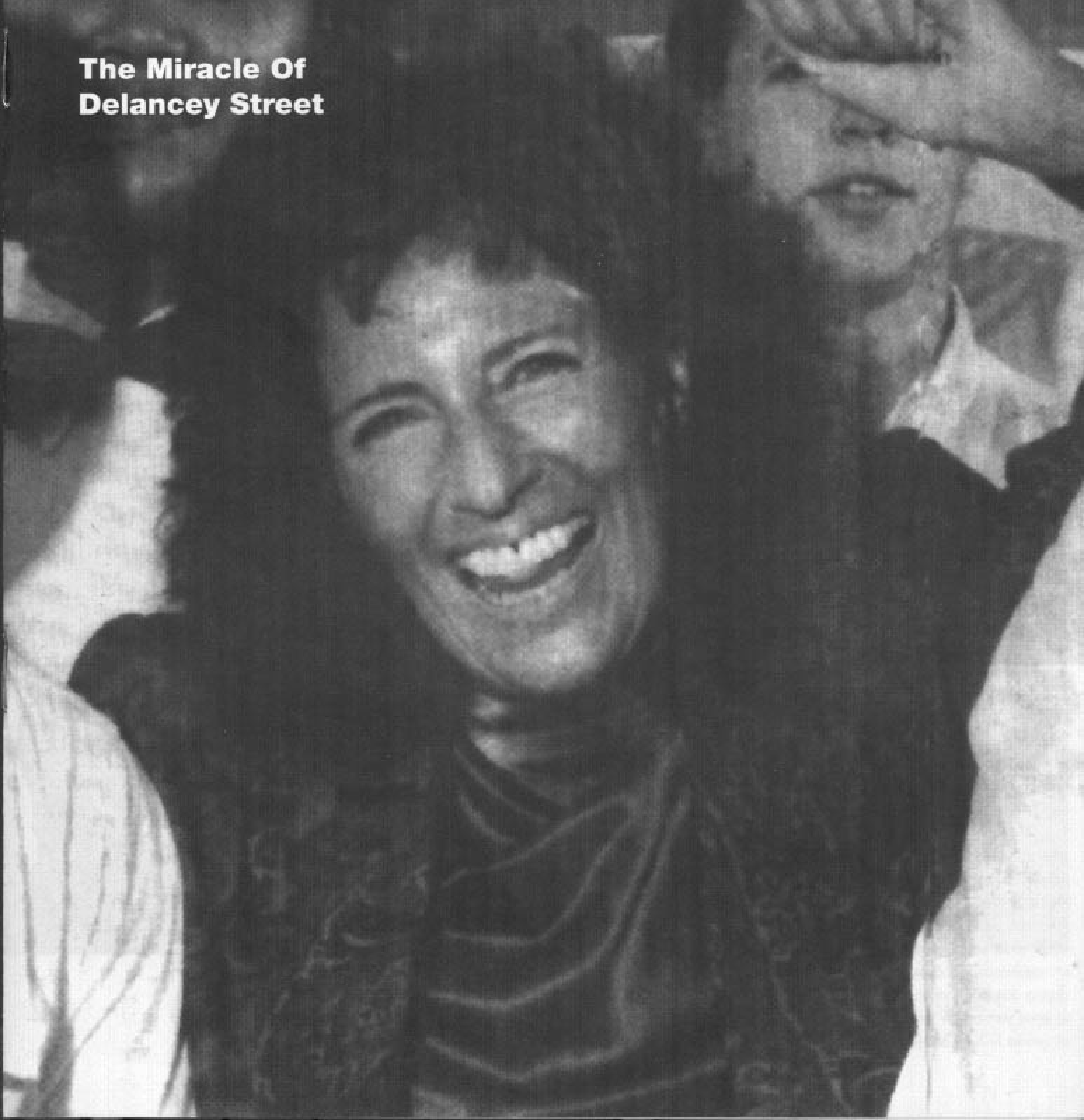
SECOND CHANCES

The Miracle Of Delancey Street



SECOND CHANCES

Miracles are Tough to Come by— Mimi Silbert's Delancey Street Offers Hardened Criminals the Opportunity to Turn Their Lives Around.

By Veronica Chater

Photography by John Chater

On a one-block stretch of prime San Francisco waterfront, 500 hardened ex-cons and ex-drug addicts serve fine food to restaurant customers, drive moving vans, talk sales over the phone and run a variety of departments at a thriving commercial center. They also enjoy evenings at the theater and afternoons in the jacuzzi, and on special occasions there are dinners or dances to celebrate ethnic holidays. This is Delancey Street, the toughest alternative to the California prison system.

At its helm is Mimi Silbert—a woman who has been called "the Mother Theresa of America's down-and-out." Her story is about caring—caring for the losers of society when they hardly care for themselves—caring so much that she invites people who have "hit bottom...the real bottom" to lift themselves up by the bootstraps and learn to feel again. She's talking about hardened street thugs, on their way to doing time in prison, or just out of prison; people with records of murder or arson or robbery, addicted to heroin or crack or alcohol, who have done "every disgusting thing you can imagine" and find themselves at the end of their rope. Silbert does not offer them a cold government program with bare bones food and board, and a staff of professionals "breathing down their necks."

Delancey Street is a beautiful place. Four levels of apartments and shops are interwoven with open, tiled courtyards and stairways throughout. The atmosphere is serene. Balconies with flower boxes line the apartment units and there is a running fountain. Anyone would feel proud to live there.

However, there is a catch. If you come to Delancey Street, you must be prepared to give it your best shot. If you leave, you won't be invited back.

Silbert's empire governs itself. Uniquely, it earns its own money (it accepts no government grants) and each resident is responsible for teaching the newest members what they know until all residents have three marketable skills and enough self-confidence to make it in society. It is a hand-me-down system that belies any program that claims you need to hire a lot of experts and spend a lot of money to get results.

"We compare ourselves all the time to Harvard or Berkeley," Silbert says, "any major four-year university, because our average stay is four years. It's teaching-based—you know, everything is set up with the understanding that you just don't know *how*. You don't know *how* to have values, you don't know *how* to work, you don't know *how* to think in a way that makes good things happen, you don't know *how* to eat at a table...but we'll teach you."

Louise Lickerman grew up on an apple orchard in Watsonville, part of a typical American family: Mom, Dad and two brothers. No tales of alcoholism, abuse or neglect. She went to school like any kid, got decent grades, and worked in the orchards with her brothers during the picking season. In her neighborhood it was expected that "you grow up, get married and have eight kids" just like everyone else, but for Louise it was different. In the eighth grade she began "dropping reds, drinking and smoking weed," and by 17 she was shooting heroin.

"I would come home to dinner and my head would be dropping into my plate, and my mother would say,'My God, Louise, what's wrong with you?' But I would lie. I would just say, 'Nothing, I'm tired'. They didn't know...They didn't have a clue."

At 17 she moved in with her dealer, and turned to purse snatching and house burglary to pay for her habit.

"I just lied and lied and lied and lied. I ripped off anybody I could for money, it didn't matter who—I'd steal from my grandmother if she had a buck."

After some jail time for strong arm robbery, Louise moved to San Francisco and met a "straight, normal, decent guy" and married him. She lied to Charley from the beginning, claiming that she was a registered nurse, and that the tracks on her arms were from a kidney disorder and from giving blood.

"I thought that being with him, and with all his straight friends, who were yuppie, real estate types who drove Volvos and BMWs and all that...would make me all right. But I despised them. They all had educations, they all had careers, they had real lives, and substance. They looked you in the eye, and they didn't have to drink the whole bottle of wine at a party. I couldn't socially drink. When I went to parties I got smashed. I'd pick fights with his women friends just because they were nice people. His crowd was a threat to me. I didn't understand their world."

Louise began stealing Charley's checks and cashing them for dope, as well as taking the animals' prescription medication, at a pet store where she worked as a receptionist.

"I came here and...I was terrified. Everyone was polite, and normal, and had clear eyes. I looked around and wondered, So where are all the drug addicts?

"When you're a drug addict you wake up every day and your first thought is, 'How can I get the money?' You don't think about anybody else's feelings, or how it's gonna affect their lives...You're so self-centered."

Charley "turned off" to her eventually, and when he discovered she was stealing from him she confessed her habit. Their marriage ended after a thorny two years. Louise was 23. Thinking she was all right, she went to live in the Mission district, where she spent the next eight years on the streets.

"I went down in the gutter. I did everything I said I would never do, from prostitution to, I don't know, hustling...I lived and breathed to get my dope, and would've done anything to get it. Me and another woman would, you know, rip off anyone we could, whether it was boosting out of a store, whether it was ripping off connections for their dope, setting people up...I would lure a man to a hotel room, and when he had his pants off, I'd steal his wallet. But my main way of making money was getting drugs for other dope fiends. There's a big circuit out there. But I was never big time. I scraped every nickel and dime to get my dope."

Louise pauses and struggles to speak. "By the time I got here, I'd had it. I really wanted help." She quietly mentions that her brother Paul would tell people his sister was dead. Her mother was phoning morgues to find her, and even her street friends didn't trust her anymore. One morning she woke up and knew she'd had enough.

"I came here and...I was terrified. Everyone was polite, and normal, and had clear eyes. I looked around and wondered, 'So where are all the drug addicts?' Suddenly I didn't fit in anymore. And in this atmosphere, you feel weird walkin' around like you're all tough, and cool, so you have to start acting like everyone else,just to fit in.

"I was a grown woman, having to start all over, you know. I was given a new wardrobe. My God, I'd never dressed this way in my life. I wouldn't have been caught dead in anything but skin-tight jeans, and a little tank top with a jean jacket and my hair all crazy, and boots! But after awhile acting like everyone else just becomes normal. So there's no way I would be able to go back out and hang out on Mission Street. Put in that situation again, I would be out of place."

Louise, now 36, is in her fifth year at Delancey Street. She is a barber, overseeing all of the new women who are in "Immigration," and works full-time in the corporate sales office. She has stopped referring to herself as an "ex-druggie," and says that she has learned to approach clients without saying, "Hey man, you know, like..."

"I love it here. I love my life. I never had a life before. I had never done anything in my life except be a drug addict. The first two years here were really tough. And after I was here for two years, I knew that I would still use drugs. It's something you know inside. If Mimi had said, 'You have to graduate now', I know that I still would have used. I wouldn't have run right off to Flocco's house to go cop some dope, but you know. You can't lie to yourself. What you learn here is to stop pretending. You can't pretend anymore. I don't want to die, and I don't want to be a junkie anymore. I would do anything not to be."

Louise plans to graduate soon, but says there's no rush. She is learning to drive tractor trailers, and thinks perhaps she'll eventually drive an 18 wheeler. Silbert has left it up to her to leave when she feels ready.

At the Delancey Street Restaurant a resident brings Mimi Silbert a cup of herbal tea and whispers something in her ear. She beams and laughs and thanks the waiter by name. Her face reflects joy and enthusiasm, and when she speaks, her raspy voice gains intensity.

"When you come into a place like Delancey Street, a little piece of you really wants to change, but a larger piece of you tells yourself 'Aaah! This is bull s—! This is gonna be the same as everything else! Nothing works...'

"And then you have to give up everything that you instinctively know—all that self destructive behavior that leads to nothing but failure. These are people who are comfortable in that cycle; it's the only one they know. And they come here, and we ask them to trust..." (she pauses to emphasize the importance of the word) "that doing it all entirely differently will somehow put together the life that you want. It takes tremendous courage to get yourself to believe, to hope, to give up all those attitudes, to push to be good, to trust people, to trust that you can become trustworthy when you never have been! All of that is incredibly difficult...and we demand it nonetheless...and it's exciting when people do it!"

When Silbert proposed Delancey Street, the idea was unpopular and controversial, and Silbert herself did not know for sure if it would work. But she fought through miles of city and state legislation that "absolutely prohibited" such an exploit, and when Willie Brown finally gave her special ordinance after three years of red tape and lengthy petitions, she personally "measured the dirt," developed, and constructed the Delancey Street project, without a cent of government money, using only the labor of the ex-cons themselves, who were guided by a few professional contractors.

The facilities function like any private company, except for the constant flow of residents in training. There is an auto shop, a moving company, an espresso cafe, a restaurant and retail shops, and the building is equipped with large rooms which are rented out to customers for such things as banquets and balls. Residents start their time at Delancey Street with a job on maintenance, and move up in the hierarchical scale of work, going to dishwashing, cooking or administrative duties as the need requires. The clothes the residents wear are donated, and the meals are served in a large, tastefully furnished cafeteria that is as neat as a pin.

"One of the hardest things about

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running Delancey Street is being realistic about who comes in the door. Because who comes in the door are people at their worst. And you really have to be tough enough to meet that head on; and not let them manipulate you and make excuses...Part of my job is to close all the gaps that would allow them to manipulate their way through. And simultaneously I have to look at them, and see who it is that they can become. That balance is a really hard thing to do: being both hard and soft; both tough and naive."

Silbert says that Delancey Street was modeled after her "extended family" from the ghettos of Boston. Her immigrant relatives and poor neighbors "banded together and took care of each other, because together we would make it up into the mainstream of America." Silbert, who has her double doctorate in Criminology and Psychology from UC Berkeley, made it out of the ghetto.

"But as the years went by, I began to see people who didn't get out of the getto, and who by a hair turn, ended up in prison."

At 42, Shirley Lamarr walks with small quick, determined steps and speaks unhurriedly about a life that was "like living in hell." She is not shy, and tells it like it is. "You can take from me all the years of my life, and I wouldn't be bothered. Except the three years I've been at Delancey Street. You can't take those. Those are the only years I've known happiness."

Shirley says her mother was "one of them women that really shouldn'a had any kids, but she did." An alcoholic who physically abused Shirley and her three siblings, she was "a pretty woman who soon found out that men would pay for her favors." She would leave the children at various relatives' homes and disappear sometimes for months. Shirley adopted the role of mother to the younger ones (who were "trick babies") from the age of 10, neglecting school work to take care of them during the times her mother had them at home in the projects of Vallejo.

Shirley married at 15. By the age of 20 she had five children (one died of heart disease) and three or four abortions and had split with her husband who, like her, "was only a youngster strugglin' to make his way in life.

"I had no idea how to be a wife...no idea how to be a mother...I certainly didn't learn from my mother. We was two kids. We didn't know what the f— we was doin'! Half the year we was on welfare, and somehow, well, this was really not how I dreamed life would be. You know, I'd watch TV, and I'd see these perfect families on the TV, and I'd say 'What the f—? Why ain't my life like that?'"

Shirley worked two minimum wage jobs to stay afloat, "droppin' bennies and whites to stay awake." She went through several relationships, none of which was stable enough to allow her to settle, and when she "went whole hog" with drugs while hanging out at the speakeasies in Oakland, she passed her four children from her husband to numerous relatives, in obvious mimic of her mother's behavior.

"I remember always wantin' to have somethin', and wantin' to be somethin', but I hadn't a clue as to how to go about that. I was tryin'...but I just didn't have the right basics. When I moved to Oakland and got a job, two of my sisters come to live with me, 'cause they're goin' through their stuff...and now I'm responsible for six people's lives. I was only 21. I'd never played in a playground or gone to no junior prom."

While working her "first decent job,

Shirley met a man over the phone, and liked his voice and his conversation. After two weeks of flirting with each other by phone, she decided to go out with him.

"When he opened the door, everything inside me told me to turn and run. Well, I didn't run. It was like I was on a suicide mission. Something destructive inside of me thought I was gonna take this mother f— and turn him around."

From there she started using on an everyday basis and when she lost her apartment from spending rent money on dope, she went straight to the streets and Poochie, her boyfriend, became her pimp.

"I knew it was bad...but there was nothing in me to stop it. I assumed that it was just meant to be...That I was *meant* to be a hooker, because I had tried to get my life together, and it didn't work. I was livin' in the pits of hell—a full blown prostitute and junkie workin' on who' stro' (whore stroll), where my kids saw me when they drove by with Poochie." Shirley cries while she talks, and wipes her face with her hands. "Every night, it was mechanical. I went to get the money to get the fix. And I knew that any night that I stepped out on that street corner, it could be my last. But it didn't matter."

She recalls through more tears that after eight years of prostitution she felt herself going crazy. One night, after being verbally and physically beaten down by Poochie, she shot him in the face with a gun from a distance of three or four feet. Poochie survived, the bullet passed through his nose and lodged in his jaw bone. Poochie would not press charges, so she was not incarcerated. She went back to the streets without Poochie and remained there until she was 39.

"By now, both my oldest son and my oldest daughter ran the streets with me...we done burglarized, me and my daughter, we done turned tricks together, we done shot dope together, smoked crack...you name it, me and my two oldest kids did it together. What the f—, you know? When I got picked up for burglary... basically I was glad to be in jail...to rest. And then I'd be goin' to prison, and that was okay,'cause I knew I'd be all right in prison."

Her relationship with the police, who most of the hookers knew pretty well, was comfortable. One of the police gave her the number of Delancey Street, and she wrote them a letter and asked for an interview. Louise Lickerman interviewed Shirley.

"My first intention was to learn somethin' to get a job. but I had no idea how to live life. All I knew was how to sleaze up to a man. Once you take off the bottom half of my body, I ain't worth s—. That's how I felt about myself. But I learned how to speak, how to act, how to carry myself like a lady.

"And they told me, 'Okay, now, go help her!' And I said, 'What do you mean, go help her? What can I tell these women? I'm a prostitute! I'm a junkie! What is it that I can tell them?' And they said, 'You can tell them how not to become one. Tell them what it feels like.' So I did. And when you become a role model, that's when you feel best about yourself."

Shirley received her GED in her second year at Delancey Street. She would like to go to college and eventually "work in politics on the outer edge" to help people like herself. At present she works full-time as an administrative assistant for Silbert in the head office. She hopes that one day her two eldest children, still in the streets, will follow her example and join her at Delancey Street

There are four existing Delancey Streets across the nation: in Brewster, NY, near Santa Fe, NM, in Greensboro, NC, and the San Francisco headquarters. Silbert is in the process of buying a building in Los Angeles for a fifth location. Of the approximately 1,000 members, 500 reside in San Francisco. One-third of all of the residents are women. "We've reached a stage where clearly the process of Delancey Street works," Silbert says, finishing her tea. "There could be people in all of our facilities who could be violent, ripping each other off, committing crimes...because there's no one watching over them with any real authority—there are no guns, none of the controls that exist in prisons—and yet we have the same population as most prisons. But there are no arrests, and no crimes..."

Silbert has a collection of over 10,000 letters from groups of people, governors and legislators, asking for help to model their own places after Delancey Street. She has turned them all down, because she doesn't have time to oversee any more projects. She has agreed, however, to begin a training institute to teach people how to run such an organization.

"I don't even know myself if it's teachable—how to have an organization that comes from your belly. I mean this is in my *belly*! And it comes from the bellies of the people who live here. You f-e-e-l it, as well as know it."

Silbert believes that prisons are necessary, but should be a short transitory punishment. "Once you spend too long in prison," she says, "it becomes a lifestyle." She vociferously opposes the death penalty, calling it "gang-like retribution," and points out that the success rate at Delancey Street is over 90 percent.

"Human life is redeemable. You're always gonna trip; you're always gonna fall somewhere; you're always gonna need people. That's human. I'm human too."■

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Mimi Silbert