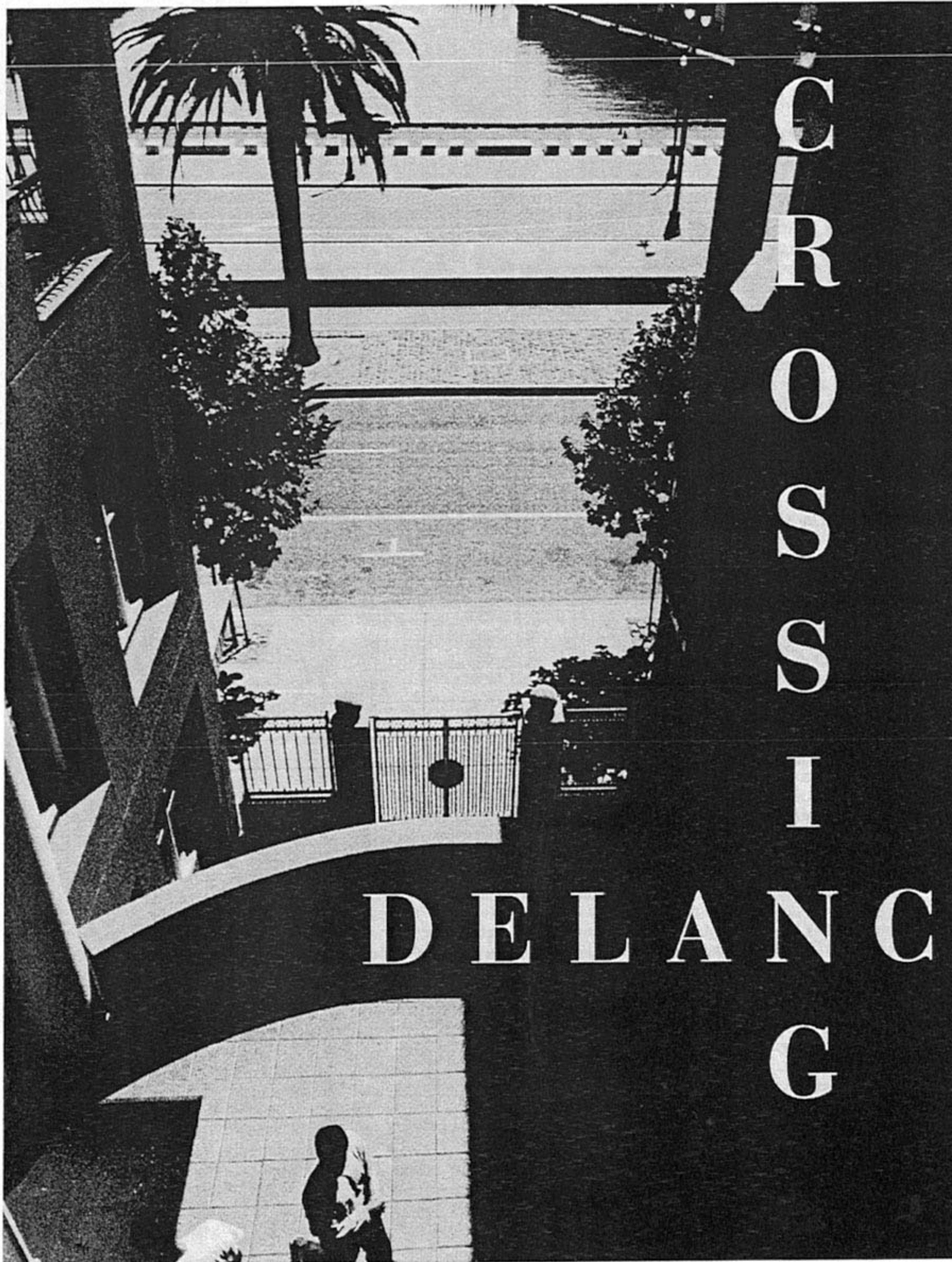


HUMANITY MAKING A DIFFERENCE  
**HOPE**  
magazine



At a San Francisco apartment complex, former inmates and addicts are proving that simple self-help and hard work can transform lives of violence and crime to ones of integrity and success.

# DELANCOY

by Jane Braxton Little  
photographs by  
Darcy Padilla



Delancey Street's Mimi Silbert

Gerald Miller is describing his ski trip to Lake Tahoe over afternoon coffee at a downtown San Francisco waterfront restaurant. Sipping from a china cup, he smooths an invisible wrinkle in the white linen tablecloth and aligns a silver knife at a perfect right angle to the table edge. His dark conservative suit is immaculate, his tie a stylish mauve abstract print knotted over a flawlessly pressed white shirt. On his neck is a six-inch scar.

"Knife fight," Miller says.

He is here, in this restaurant on a boulevard lined with palm trees, instead of prison. So is the waitress who pours our coffee and the waiter practicing his French during a lull in the afternoon clientele. This is Delancey Street, where Miller and 11,000 others have crawled out of past lives as crackheads and junkies, pimps and prostitutes, car jackers, burglars, and murderers. Some talked their way through the wrought-iron gate at 600 Embarcadero Street. Others came straight from prison. All arrived from lives at rock bottom.

At Delancey Street they are starting over. And they are doing it entirely by themselves—without staff and without a penny of government funds. In the process, these offenders, whom society has labeled losers, are proving that simple self-help and hard work can transform lifestyles of violence and crime to

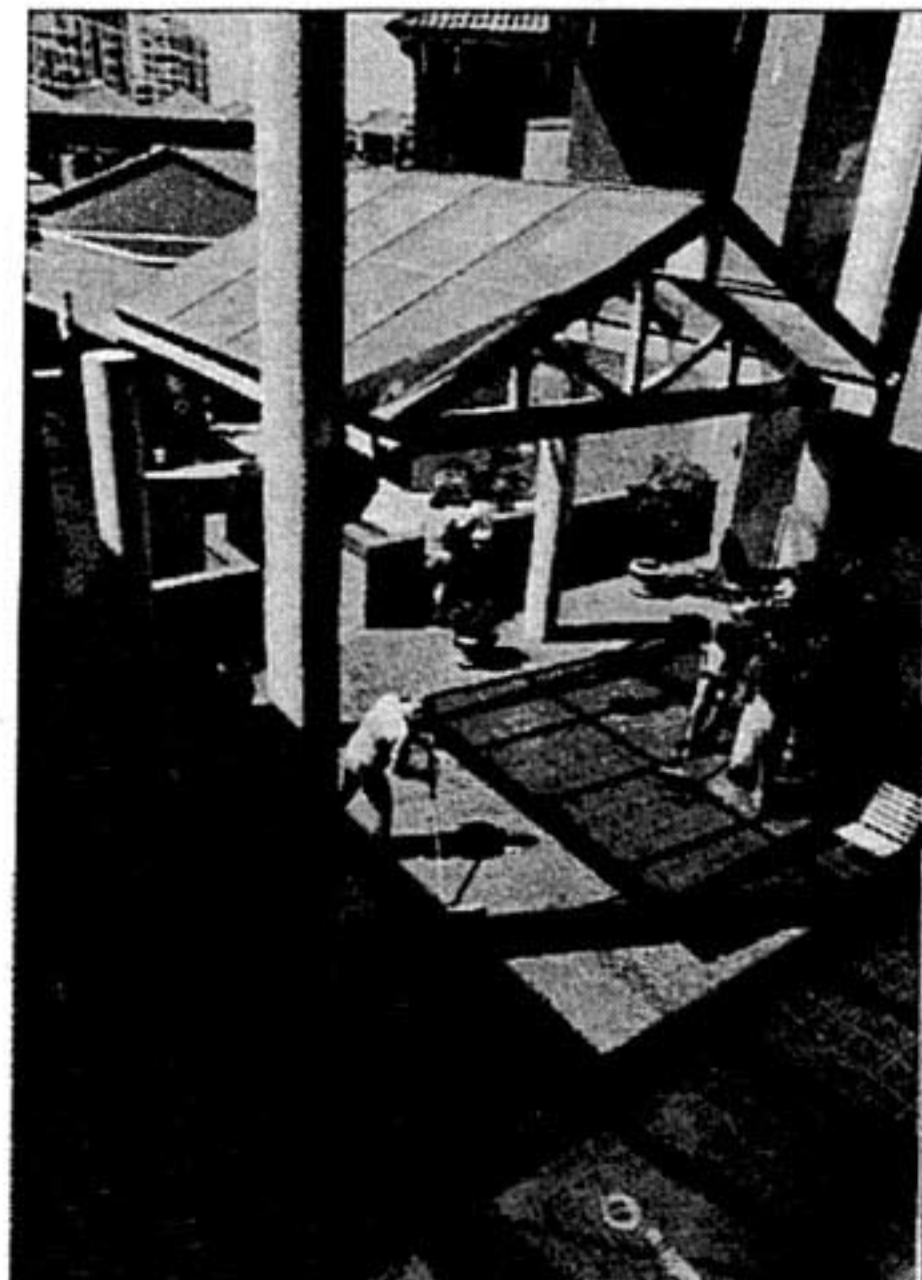
ones of integrity, purpose, and success.

"It's hard-core responsibility," says Mimi Silbert, a fifty-four-year-old criminologist and psychologist who co-founded the Delancey Street Foundation in 1972. "We are lunatics on taking responsibility for everything—not just self but neighbor and community as well. If we want it to work we have to make it work."

Something is working at Delancey Street. Despite the residents' pasts, there has never been one incident of violence. An episode or two of spitting, says Silbert, but never a fight. No one has been arrested at Delancey Street in its twenty-five years of operation.

Most graduates of the program never return to prison. The success rates range from seventy-five percent to ninety percent—a direct contrast with the sixty-seven percent of inmates released from prisons who end up being reincarcerated. Silbert calls the statistics "silly counting games." What's important, she says, is that most Delancey Street participants stay out of prison.

Delancey Street alumni graduate into society as taxpaying citizens who work as lawyers, truck drivers, contractors, realtors, and retail business owners. They have been elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors,





Stephanie Muller at Delancey Street's roller blade rental shop, one of twenty-five commercial enterprises that help support the Foundation. Muller, who says she was a "homeless bag lady" before she found Delancey Street, is among 9,000 people who've turned their lives around here.

served on the San Francisco Housing Commission, and as deputy sheriffs. Delancey Street's success is no mystery, says Stephanie Muller, a program spokeswoman who has been a resident for years. "It's just hard work. We do it ourselves. It's life."

Gerald Miller holds open a gate outside the Delancey Street restaurant and, with Stephanie Muller, begins our tour of the Mediterranean-style complex. Handsome three-story brick-red stucco buildings surround a spacious quadrangle complete with a small swimming pool. Pink and red geraniums bloom from pots decorating the windows of the second-floor dormitory rooms where the 500 residents live.

A middle-aged man sweeping the terra cotta courtyard greets Gerald and pauses to lean on his broom, his eyes suddenly vacant. He's a new resident, probably still kicking drugs, says Stephanie. A pair of burly laborers cross the quad in green coveralls with Delancey Street's triangle logo on the back. They work across the Embarcadero at Pier 36, headquarters for Delancey Street Movers, the program's cross-country moving company.

Inside a freshly sheet-rocked space on the ground floor, a crew of residents is building an espresso bar. This is Delancey Street's latest enterprise, a cafe, art gallery, ice cream and book store. "It opens when we're done," says

Muller. "Soon." Just beyond the hubbub of construction, a woman who does not look up silently clips an edge of grass in a serene courtyard where a mourning dove perches in a fig tree.

Delancey Street runs on the work of its residents. No one receives a salary, not even Silbert, the president, who is clearly in charge of the entire operation. All of the labor is provided by residents, from food services and maintenance to administration, business, and financial management. To generate income they run a bevy of outside enterprises: print and copy shop, automotive service center, Christmas tree sales and decorating, movie screening, catering, paratransit services, and roller blade rentals. These businesses net around \$3 million a year. All are solely owned and operated by Delancey Street Foundation.

In addition to raising the money that feeds, clothes, and houses the residents, the twenty-five commercial enterprises provide vocational and business training. Delancey Street is less a recovery center or experiment in rehabilitation than an educational institution, says Stephanie Muller. Everything is about learning.

The curriculum starts with personal maintenance: how to make a bed, plan a day, get along with people. The first work most new residents do is cleaning. The next semester is training in the

restaurant or one of the other in-house enterprises. Everyone at Delancey Street is required to complete vocational programs which give them skills in three areas: business, labor, and working with people.

Along with these three basic skills, no one leaves without the equivalent of a high school diploma. "We even make you go to opera, theater—everything. How to have a classy conversation. This is a total re-education of everything. We want you to be a good person, or at least act as if you are until you begin to believe it," says Stephanie.

Soon some residents will earn college degrees. Delancey Street recently became chartered as a campus of Golden Gate University offering classes in a four-year bachelor's degree program. The campus has its own college shield, a double triangle emblazoned with the Latin "Vertere Vertute."

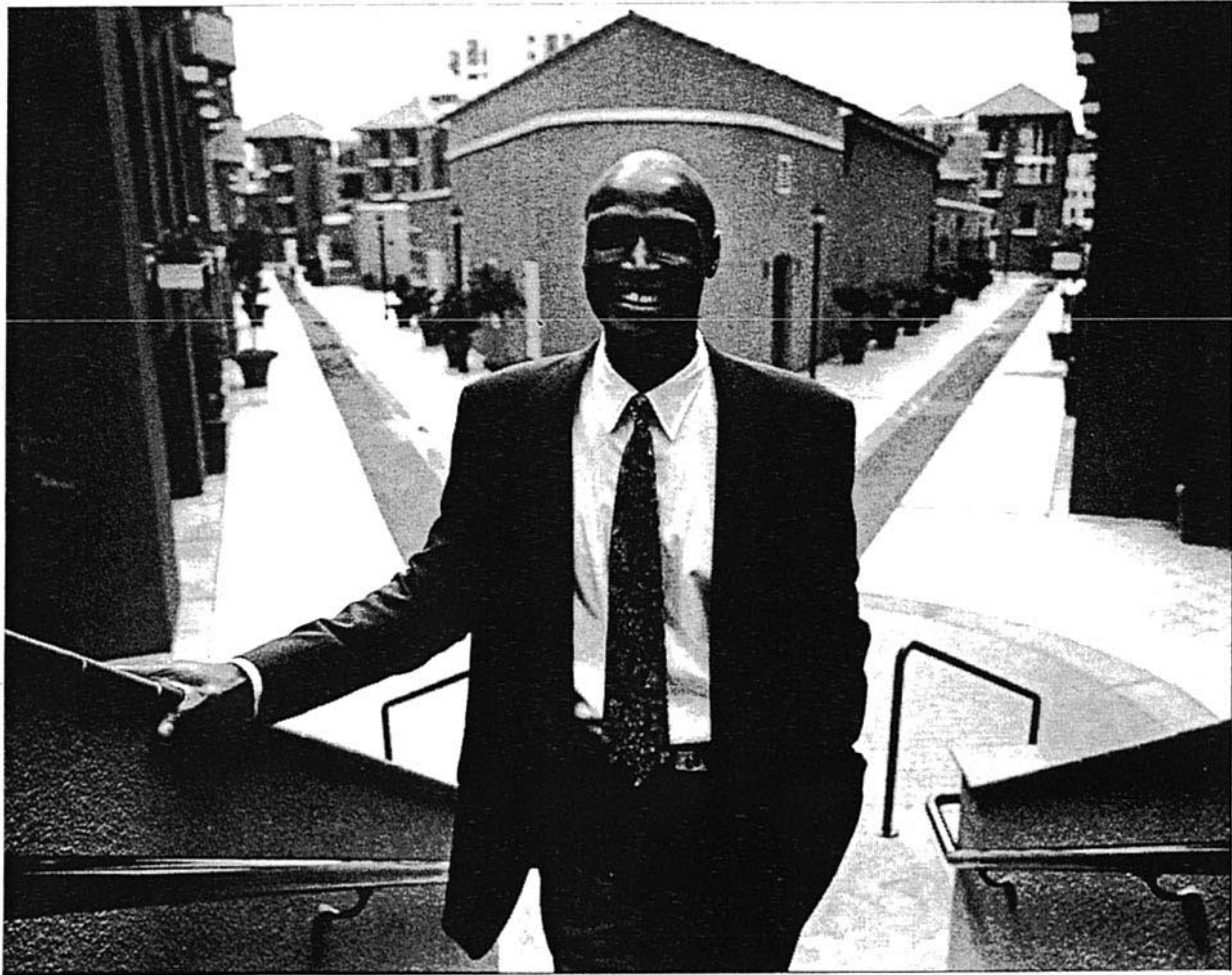
"We made it up," says Stephanie with a giggle, "but it's very real. It means 'To Transform Through Courage.' That's us!" She and Gerald are both members of the freshman class.

While education and vocational training are the tangible preoccupations at Delancey Street, beneath them is a bootstrap operation so fundamental and so personal that most new residents don't believe it is possible. No one expects them to—not at first, says Silbert.

"We have a saying 'to act as if.' We say if you walk around saying 'please' and 'thank you,' you will become a person who talks that way. If you act as if you believe in yourself, you will."

And if you act as if you are a community that can build a \$30 million upscale residential complex a block from the San Francisco Bay Bridge, you will. That's how, in 1990, the residents got their block-size triangular center on land leased from the city's redevelopment agency. Instead of hiring outside crews, they did everything themselves—for half the cost, says Silbert. "We walked around the construction site acting as if we could pull down buildings and raise girders. Pretty soon we began to believe it ourselves."

The construction, she says, reinforced one of the program's fundamental lessons: "You're building your own foundation here. If you make a mistake



Gerald Miller rebuilt his life from scratch at Delancey Street. He says his first job, setting a table, took him a week. He has since run Delancey's warehouse and succeeded at many other jobs there. Today, one of his regular jobs is interviewing Delancey Street applicants—at the prisons where he once lived.

with a wall or a joint you tear it down and rebuild it. That's what we're doing here at Delancey Street for ourselves—tearing down bad crooked things and replacing them with good straight things.”

Named for the section of New York where immigrants assembled at the turn of the century, Delancey Street sees the felons and addicts it houses as new arrivals in another America where they must learn the language, social values and employment skills of success. The average resident has been a hard-core drug addict for ten years and in prison four times. Many have been gang members. Most come from families trapped in poverty for several generations.

Delancey Street is the place where their jig is finally up—where everybody has already heard all the excuses, all the stories, and all the lies because they have told them all themselves. This is where the life of lies ends and they begin building new lives. They don't

call it rebuilding because most never had real lives before Delancey Street, says Stephanie Muller. “We're all people who would be dead or in prison for the rest of our lives,” she says.

A vivacious forty-two-year-old with warm brown eyes and a throaty, raucous laugh, Stephanie Muller stumbled into Delancey Street from the streets. “I blundered myself in. I was a homeless bag lady. No clothes. No money. I slept with anyone who had money and I'd rip 'em off.”

She had been “shooting dope” since she was thirteen years old. The daughter of a middle-class California family, she was kicked out of school in the tenth grade. “I hated the way I was. I did degrading things and I felt guilty. I couldn't think about it so I shot dope so I wouldn't. I did not care what happened to me.”

At Delancey Street Muller saw a way out. “I saw people just like myself—acting, looking just like me. I saw a

chance to be able to, well, hope—a chance to hope.”

Muller moved from waiting tables to painting and decorating the new building; she is in charge of the foundation's Christmas tree sales program. Since 1989 she has worked as Silbert's assistant in the president's office, a series of carpeted rooms with framed water colors on walls above desks strewn with the paperwork of managing a 500-unit residential complex. Stephanie juggles two telephones nearly buried in a functional mess of file folders and loose papers. And hats—a stack of them careening on a shelf beside her office chair. “We had Hat Day,” she says. “Someone got a bad haircut so we all wore hats to make her feel better.”

Gerald Miller, who's forty, arrived at Delancey Street from prison, where he had spent thirteen of his last fifteen years. A towering man with an imposing presence, he speaks with careful deliberation. Like seventy percent of

the residents, he wrote a letter of application to Delancey Street from his cell. "I told a bunch of lies about how I wanted to change my life. A couple of residents came and interviewed me and I was accepted."

Gerald was facing twelve years in prison for drug-related crimes; Delancey Street offered a two-year program. "It was a mathematical choice," he says with a beguiling smile. "I was out of it but not that out of it."

What looked like a cruise compared to prison, however, became the hardest thing Gerald had ever done. He faced the daunting task of getting a life. And all those lofty goals—all those "lies" in his application letter—came back to haunt him.

"You hang yourself with your own lies," Muller says with a laugh as Miller nods his head and grins agreement. "You say all these things—just like Gerald—and we use them against you. Because even if it's a lie, it's your lie. You wanted to come here. We didn't make you. You have to take responsibility, even for your own bullshit."

And that was what was hardest for



At work in the automotive shop, which along with two dozen other businesses, nets the Delancey Street Foundation about \$3 million a year, making it entirely independent from government dollars.

Miller, he says: taking responsibility. He began by simply getting up in the morning, getting dressed, and cleaning his room. His first job was setting a table. It took him a week.

"It felt like a week, learning where all the spoons go. In prison the table is already set. Before that I just never learned—didn't pay attention, I guess."

From setting a table, Miller moved to an espresso bar. He worked in the foundation warehouse, then ran it; he did maintenance, then supervised the crew of new maintenance workers.

Next he worked with the program's advertising gift specialties where he sold imprinted items. "It was hard," he says. "I didn't want people to know how much I didn't know. And it's hard to be responsible for everything that comes out of your mouth. It's not easy to live like a decent human being."

Miller had hardly begun thinking about the possibility of becoming a decent human being when he was given responsibility for a new arrival fresh out of prison. Everyone, even an addict only a month

off drugs, has something to offer, according to Silbert. The Delancey Street program depends on the principle of "each one teach one." A person who reads at an eighth-grade level teaches someone at the fifth-grade level.

"That was hard, too," says Miller. "I wasn't ready to show someone else how to do anything. I was just learning myself. But I did, somehow."

Appearance is part of changing a resident's self-concept. Silbert calls it the "outside-in" approach to personal

transformation. If you dress as if you are a successful person you begin to believe that you can be, Silbert says.

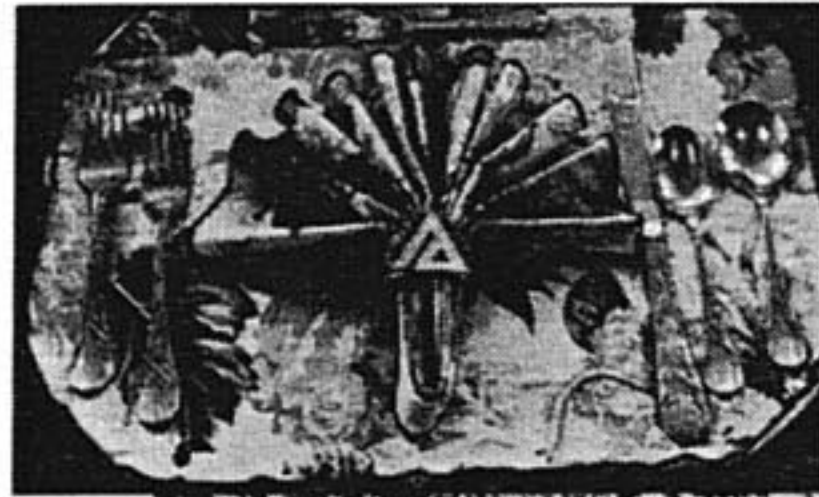
Stephanie Muller walked into Delancey Street wearing "little hussy clothes about this big," she says, pinching her forefinger against her thumb. "I thought the only way people would like me was looking like that." She made the obligatory trip to the Delancey Street boutique. "They put me into a dress with a frilly collar, then a business suit. I felt so awkward."

For Gerald Miller it was a suit and tie. "I'd never worn a necktie in my life. I had no idea people got up every morning and wore ties everyday. Now I do it," he says with a broad smile, which crosses his face and bursts into a laugh. "You change. I started seeing I could live life a different way. I didn't have to be a drug addict or a convict."

Gerald Miller and Stephanie Muller are among the approximately 9,000 of Delancey Street's 11,000 participants who have put crime and drugs behind them. The program's success in reshaping the lives of drug addicts has been recognized with a wall full of awards. It has been hailed as the most successful program of its kind in the world. But, although government officials have studied its unorthodox mix of in-your-face realism and ambitious idealism, no state or federal agency has incorporated it into a publicly-funded drug treatment program.

"We do everything differently," says Silbert. Instead of hiring professional staff to "bend down and help the poor, sick, crazy, nasty people," Delancey Street uses its own residents, she says. Instead of isolating problems into bureaucratic categories such as welfare, crime, literacy, or skills problems, Delancey Street deals with the whole person. "If you don't do everything, none of it will end up working."

Government officials who respect the successes of Delancey Street say they use some of the same methods to treat hard-core drug addicts. Numerous state and federal programs create a similar therapeutic community where clients have to earn privileges by taking more responsibilities, says Fred W. Garcia, deputy director of the Office of



Delancey Street's elegant restaurant, where many new arrivals from prison begin their journey—learning everything from how to set a table to how to carry on a classy conversation.

National Drug Control Policy.

California's Amity program at R.J. Donovan prison, for example, provides intensive substance abuse treatment for inmates during the last nine to twelve months of their prison commitment. Many states offer treatment instead of prison for first and second offenders, who are processed through drug courts and given a chance to kick their habit. These programs result in a seven-dollar savings for every one dollar invested, says John Erickson, chief of California's Office of Substance Abuse.

But the current public push to "lock 'em up and throw away the key" has not favored rehabilitation, despite its proven success. In 1993 Silbert worked briefly with Lee Brown (then President Clinton's federal drug czar) to establish a national drug rehabilitation program. Their approaches were simply too different, she says.

"They all look at you and want to pigeon-hole you. When government thinks about replicating our model, it loses sight of what makes it work: common sense and not a lot of abstract theories," Silbert says.

Delancey Street has replicated its own San Francisco model in North Carolina, New York, New Mexico, and

Los Angeles, where, in 1993, the foundation bought the abandoned Midtown Hilton Hotel to accommodate 200 residents. At these five centers, approximately 1,000 drug addicts participate in the program at any given time.

In response to the deluge of requests for advice, the foundation launched a training program in 1994. The Institute for Social Renewal accepts trainee applicants willing to live at Delancey Street and participate in residential life for two days to a week. Some arrange to stay longer.

"Living here is the only model I have," says Silbert. "If you don't do it, you can't teach it. If you can't teach it, nobody's learning." Participants at the training institute have included school kids from Amherst, Massachusetts, homeless people from Detroit, members of the Arizona Board of Corrections, and Maoris, the indigenous people of New Zealand. What they take from Delancey Street and how they apply it are still complete unknowns, says Silbert.

For Gerald Miller, life at Delancey Street does not allow him to forget the life he left behind. One of his regular jobs is in the criminal justice department visiting the prisons where he

once lived. He interviews applicants for Delancey Street who are candidates for court-ordered probation. If assigned to the program by a judge, they must comply with all of the terms of their probation or return to prison.

Although a judge approves the assignment, Delancey Street residents decide whether to accept a candidate. Gerald looks for the worst of the applicants, the ones who have hit bottom and want something else. Delancey Street is as selective as Harvard, says Silbert, but instead of seeking the top two percent of applicants, it chooses the bottom two percent.

Once they have been accepted, residents spend their first thirty days without any contact with their families. Then they are allowed to write and receive letters. After six months they earn one telephone call home.

For the families outside, the wait without communication is excruciating, says the aunt of a current resident who requested anonymity. "He had to prove that he was worthy of just speaking to his mom," she says. But after watching her nephew's life go downhill in a slurry of alcohol and drugs, Delancey Street seemed his only chance. "It's his hope. Without it my sister figures she would have to write off her son. Gone forever. Like dead." When her son had successfully completed one year, the mother was allowed to visit him at Delancey Street. "It was awkward," the aunt says. "She wanted to say 'good for you,' but it's not a cheerleader sort of deal."

Most Delancey Street residents reach a point in their stay when the months of acting "as if" suddenly sink in, says Stephanie Muller. "You've been b-s-ing your way through everything when you see that you are actually going to make it. At some point you say, 'Shit! This is real.' When that moment finally comes, other people help you. And you need them."

Not everyone makes it. Some are unable to keep their commitment to stay at Delancey Street for two years. "They just leave. It's not like we have any locks on the doors," Miller says. If they are on court-ordered probation, someone from Delancey Street notifies the probation department. Others do just fine. "They leave here and just have

regular lives," he says. Delancey Street keeps no statistics on residents who leave, but Silbert estimates that between ten and twenty-five percent of the 11,000 accepted revert to drugs and return to prison.

Despite its odd collection of tenants, Delancey Street is a small town whose residents know all about one another's warts. And, like small town neighbors, they respond to one another's needs. "Everybody works together, lives together, yells together, cries together," says Silbert. "All these gang members sworn to kill each other—they become part of a completely integrated community here. Ultimately they know they need each other to make it."

It may be the intimacy of this community interaction which is responsible for the remarkable lack of discipline problems, says Stephanie. The rules are simple: No drugs or alcohol. No physical violence. No threat of physical violence. And sex? "We're very old fashioned," she says. "You have to date here and everyone's always in your business.... The program works because this is our home. It's just like family. We develop a certain loyalty to it and to each other. People here are saving lives."

After five years as a Delancey Street resident, Gerald Miller is beginning to look forward to a life outside the residential complex. He has stayed longer than the average of four years. When he does graduate, it will be a decision he makes with the fellow residents he has grown to love and trust. "Ultimately, the choice is up to each individual but you make it the way a family does when a child leaves home," says Miller.

Miller hasn't decided what his work will be. "Something constructive. Something I'm comfortable with that generates an income." And his life beyond work? "I'll have a family. I'll drive home from my job in a car," he says with a gaze toward the bay which takes him far beyond it. "I used to care what kind of car it was—had to be a Cadillac or something really nice. Now it's just a car that takes me home to a wife and a couple of kids. I'm a decent, responsible, caring human being." ▲

# THE WOMAN BEHIND DELANCEY STREET

**M**imi Silbert drives a bulldozer and teaches Shakespeare. She ties rebar (steel reinforcement rods used in construction) and holds a double doctorate in psychology and criminology. She is a former

high school cheerleader and student of existentialism under Jean-Paul Sartre.

As president and CEO of the Delancey Street Foundation, Silbert, who is fifty-four, uses everything she ever learned and every inch of her five-foot frame to bootstrap drug addicts into productive, crime-free lives. She is the founder of the San Francisco self-help rehabilitation center, its visionary, and the yin and yang of its day-to-day operations.

"I've been at this twenty-five years—my entire [adult] life, really. I have this silly, absurd notion that if I could just get the entire United States to sit still, and talk to them about what we're doing here, I know they'd understand. It's just plain common sense."

Silbert started Delancey Street in 1971 with four drug addicts in a San Francisco apartment. Her partner was John Maher, a former felon. They shared a vision of a center for criminal rehabilitation, and vocational training run by ex-convicts for ex-convicts. It would be entirely self-sufficient, they agreed, with no outside funds and everyone working to support the group.

In late 1972, Silbert, Maher, and around 100 former felons pooled their incomes to buy an old mansion that once housed the Soviet consulate in fashionable Pacific Heights. To mollify the neighbors, who were less than thrilled with the purchase, Silbert and Maher volunteered the residents for neighborhood chores. The first request came from a society matron who needed her living room cleared of furniture for a benefit. That job inspired Delancey Street Movers, one of the first of the businesses owned and operated by the foundation.

Over the last quarter century, Delancey Street has grown to twenty-five commercial enterprises run by 500 recovering drug addicts from a \$30 million residential/business com-



plex on the San Francisco waterfront. Another 500 residents participate in programs in Los Angeles, New York, New Mexico, and North Carolina. The cost to taxpayers is zero.

For Silbert, Delancey Street is a duplication of the immigrant neighborhood of her childhood near Boston. Her father owned and operated a corner drugstore. Both her parents matched the poverty of their neighborhood with a deep sense of justice, she says. "Everybody looked out for everybody else. We were all struggling upward. It was like

holding hands climbing a mountain together. Together we rise or together we fall. That's what it's like here at Delancey Street."

After majoring in English and psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Silbert earned doctorates in criminology and psychology from the University of California at Berkeley. It was during her intern work as a prison psychologist that she began questioning the penal system. With everything provided and paid for by taxpayers, it is no wonder criminals emerge from prison feeling no different than when they went in, she says.

At Delancey Street, residents do everything for themselves. But Silbert has built more into the program than responsibility and skills. In the midst of her success as a prison consultant—in a moment of flush over the joy of helping people—she had a flash of what it would be like not to know the power of giving. She made the experience of personal success a cornerstone at Delancey Street.

"No one should be in the position of only receiving. That's depressing. It's enough to make you feel violent or give you a victim's view of life," she says. "Everyone should get to



feel terrific because they are helping people.”

Silbert and Maher fell in love and lived together for ten years, helping one another raise twin sons from an earlier marriage. In the mid-1980s, Maher, a recovering alcoholic, began drinking again. A few years later, he resigned from the organization. He died of a heart attack in 1988.

If Silbert has one regret about Delancey Street, it is that she cannot include more people. Turning applicants away is painful, she says. She hopes her Institute for Social Renewal will inspire others to launch their own programs tailored to their own skills and the particular problems they want to solve.

Meanwhile, Silbert devotes her energy to the Delancey Street operation, which last year raised \$12.3 million in revenues. She negotiates new programs, helps solicit around \$3 million a year in product donations, participates in conferences with drug rehabilitation professionals around the world, and scolds a construction crew outside her office, where her long working hours require three secretaries operating in shifts. In a system based on role models, Silbert is the ultimate role model.

“It takes me a long time before I say something is working. I have no idea what will happen when we come to the real test. But I’ve been doing this for twenty-five years—smashing my head against a brick wall. The bricks are beginning to move. I can feel it.”

—JBL