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By Tanya Schevitz
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Harvard *of the* underclass



Kim DaRosa, who is working toward a college degree, arranged place settings for a lunch at Delancey Street.



Photos by Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Mimi Silbert, president and founder of Delancey Street Foundation, lectured to students working toward a bachelor's degree.



CARLOS AVILA GONZALEZ / *The Chronicle*

Mimi Silbert spoke to Delancey Street Foundation students, including (from left) Freddie Baca, John Pavao, Gerald Miller, Desi Rutherford and Anita Jackson.

“My interest in the school thing was always there, but by the time I started getting into prison at 35... I thought it was too late.”

ROBERT MANSFIELD, student, 51

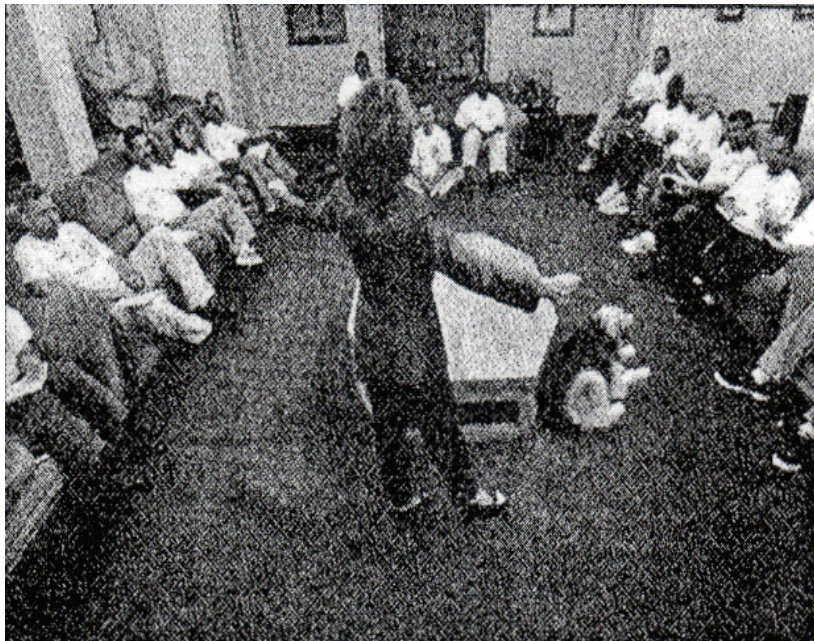
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Kim DaRosa is just 31, but she remembers her high school years only dimly. She was high on drugs most of the time and skipped classes to run with her gang.

“I failed P.E. (in high school). To ever even dream that I’d get a college degree is just amazing,” said DaRosa. When she started working toward her bachelor’s, she was terrified she wouldn’t be smart enough.

“I never thought I would make it. But I get good grades,” she said.

DaRosa is one of the 14 residents at the Delancey Street Foundation who are earning degrees in urban studies through an unusual partnership with San Francisco State University.



Silbert, speaking on community organizing, addressed students at Delancey who are earning credits in urban studies.

She and her classmates are not your average students. Most are recovered drug users, having abused crack, powder cocaine, heroin, you name it. Some have sold drugs. Most have been in and out of prison for years. Many have been homeless.

Some were illiterate when they arrived at Delancey Street.

The self-help residential program has not only given them a chance at turning their lives around, but also at getting a piece of paper they never thought they would see: a college diploma. “My interest in the school thing was always there, but by the time I started getting into prison at 35 and I got (to Delancey Street) at 45, I thought it was too late,” said Robert Mansfield, 51. “It took a couple of years to see a different future. ... Now, I don’t see any limits.”

The program, which began in the spring, was developed after Mimi Silbert, founder, president and CEO of Delancey Street Foundation, approached San Francisco State President Robert Corrigan with the idea last year. Corrigan welcomed the partnership.

“What I’ve been pushing is how we reach out to different populations,” he said.

gave him a big hug, heckling, “What about green tea?”

school before but had never been able to stick with it before. “The classes

Delancey’s college students

“It is kind of a social commitment to serve an at-risk population striving mightily to reform itself.”

The program’s teachers are all approved by San Francisco State Professor Raquel Pinderhughes, who runs the program and volunteers her time to teach a research methods class. Others at the top of their fields teach courses free of charge as well. Senate President Pro tem John Burton, D-San Francisco, taught politics last quarter. Former San Francisco Muni chief Emilio Cruz is teaching urban transportation.

“We believe that these are voices that need to be heard in urban planning and policy debates,” Pinderhughes said. “They have a particular and unique perspective.”

Pinderhughes said that because the program is taught by volunteers, it does not cost the campus anything beyond some administrative time.

Although the curriculum is the same as for students on the main 19th Avenue Campus, the classes for the Delancey Street residents are taught where they live, at the foundation complex near Pacific Bell Park. As a result, the atmosphere is sometimes less predictable than on campus.

One evening recently, as his students listened attentively, Cruz launched straight into the intricacies of urban transportation and federal spending plans for transportation that emphasize connections and different modes.

But as Cruz introduced the students to ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) and TEA21 (Transportation Equity Act for the 21st century), Silbert bounded into the room with her dog Amnesty and

Cruz, now chief operating officer of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, has worked with Delancey Street for several years. Although he was able to go to Stanford University, he said he knows he is no smarter than his father, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico with an eighth-grade education and worked as a steel-mill machinist.

“That little piece of paper is a key to many doors. Education creates opportunity and opportunity creates security,” Cruz said.

Silbert said that Delancey Street has provided its residents with classes on everything from high school courses to astronomy. The classes have been taught by its own residents, with each teaching students below them as they advance. But the partnership with San Francisco State gives the foundation’s education legitimacy.

“We literally believe ourselves to be the Harvard of the underclass,” said Silbert, who is teaching community organizing in the program. “It is the most wonderful thing that could happen – to get formal recognition, and to have our people ... get a B.A. degree like everybody else.”

The residents, who have already taken two years of general education courses through Golden Gate University, take a full load of about three courses a quarter and are on track to graduate in June 2003. They fit classes and homework in around a demanding work schedule that comes with being part of running the foundation’s restaurant, café, moving company and Christmas tree and decoration business.

“I’m the kind of person who wants to learn things,” said Diana Sanders, 45, who said she had played at going to

are great. They are thought-provoking. They make your mind work.”

Mansfield hopes he can use the degree and those connections to land some sort of job with the city and county of San Francisco.

“I would really like to do something that feels worthwhile,” he said.

Although many of the other students do not have specific career plans laid out, they stay it will enhance their credibility – and that there is great value in the accomplishment of earning the degree.

Charles Williams, 41, was just a few units short of graduating from the Ivy League’s Dartmouth College when he signed a free agent contract with the Philadelphia Eagles.

But he was dropped after half a year in the pros and fell into drugs and despair. He spent years in and out of San Quentin before entering Delancey Street in 1996.

“Twenty years later, I’m trying to complete something I started.”