

# THE HEART OF AMERICA



Ten Core Values That  
Make Our Country Great

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*Mimi Silbert*

Mimi Silbert has made an interesting observation. After thirty years of working with prison populations, Mimi says the chief characteristic of people in prison is that they are almost always on the receiving end.

"They are either receivers of punishment and hate and aggression or the receivers of welfare, charity or therapy," she says, "but they are never the doers. They are never the givers."

At their core, these people are the "takers" of the world—the takers of life and property, the takers of community services and assistance. They are "self" centered and "self" involved. They have never learned to look beyond their own immediate needs and interests. Some value their slightest desire more than another's life. But Mimi Silbert has shown they are not lost forever. She has helped turn around more than 20,000 hardened criminals, making productive citizens of former felons and drug addicts.

"Our average resident is violent, belongs to a gang and has eighteen felony convictions," Mimi Silbert says. "That means eighteen strikes in a country where three strikes puts you in prison for life. And we have never had an arrest. We have never had a crime committed in twenty-five years by these people."

Mimi's approach evolved out of her experience as a prison psychologist. It didn't take her long, she recalls, to decide that the system of institutionalization and punishment doesn't work.

"It's those of us who are givers who get to feel terrific about ourselves," Mimi said. "So it became clear to me, if I really was going to do something, it meant setting up an environment in which everybody is a giver and everybody is a doer, as well as a receiver and a learner."

From the beginning, Mimi's goal was to create a criminal rehabilitation center whose central tenet was self-sufficiency. She started out in a small San Francisco apartment. She worked with ex-cons and drug addicts, holding group counseling sessions and seeking training for them in employable skills. Everyone involved, including Silbert, pooled their incomes and shared resources.

Today, Delancey Street Foundation is housed on the San Francisco waterfront in a \$30 million, three-acre complex called the Embarcadero Triangle. The complex, complete with apartments, shops, restaurants and theatres, was funded by an unsecured bank loan. It was built entirely by Silbert's extended brood of ex-cons. She personally supervised the job and acted as the project manager.

Silbert is the only nonresident employee of Delancey Street. The operation is staffed and run entirely by ex-cons. In all, Delancey Street has successfully developed and run twenty businesses that provide more than 60 percent of what it costs to run the organization. Among the businesses the residents operate are retail stores, a restaurant, a moving company and \$1 million Christmas tree sale project.

In the process, Mimi has helped over 10,000 people receive their high school equivalency degrees. Over 1,000 of these students have gone on to graduate from vocational school. Thirty students have received their BA, and another twenty are in the process of earning their degrees at San Francisco State University.

Despite Delancey Street's phenomenal growth and success over the years, the basic tenets that Silbert began with remain constant: each resident must own up to self-responsibility, develop at least three marketable skills, perform volunteer work and serve as a role model for other residents. "Each one teach one" is the guiding principal of Delancey Street.

"We compare ourselves to Harvard," Mimi says. "Both are four-year programs. They take the top two percent and teach them everything they need to know to become successful. We take the bottom two percent of the population—we're equally snotty about our bottom two percent—and then we teach people who are used to being self-centered and full of hate to become full of love and to take care of each other.

"We give no therapy because the only therapy that works is to forget about yourself for a while and worry about somebody else," she concludes. "In the need to help someone else, all your strengths will emerge."