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Third in a series

## Delancey Street is way out of disaster

By Eugene Driscoll  
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BREWSTER, N.Y. — Almost everyone in this place has been locked up, even Sheba, the friendly mutt who wanders aimlessly through the house.

"She was picked up at the pound and came in just like the rest of us," John Glemser, 52, said.

The "us" Glemser refers to is the 54 residents of The Delancey Street Foundation, a rehabilitation community of ex-convicts and drug addicts where the dregs of the earth become the salt of the earth.

Not so long ago the people there — about 12 of whom are women — were junkies, thieves, convicts and prostitutes. They

say Delancey Street saved their lives, pure and simple.

"When you come in, you sit on a bench and the drugs are left behind," Glemser said. "So what's left is a shell. What we do is teach life skills: integrity, honesty, how to be responsible."

There is no professional staff at Delancey Street, which occupies a 92-acre estate on Turk Hill Road off Route 22. There are no psychiatrists or social workers. There are just people who turned their lives around by coming to Brewster and conforming to the program's core belief: "Each one teach one."

The Delancey Street Foundation was started in California in

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Keith Spence, a four-year resident of The Delancey Street Foundation, a rehabilitation community in Brewster, N.Y., talks about life changes with other residents during one of the foundation's recent seminars. The rehabilitation facility conducts the seminars five times a week.

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1971 by Mimi Silbert, a criminologist, and John Maher, an ex-convict who died in 1984. The two formed the foundation's core beliefs: That people thought to be incorrigible can get better by working hard and holding each other accountable.

The foundation has sites all over the country, including New Mexico, North Carolina and its headquarters in California. It arrived in Brewster in 1980. Residents gradually renovated and improved the property, which was once owned by wealthy circus pioneer Seth Howes.

It is different from traditional drug rehabs. It doesn't cost money to go there. It doesn't take money from the government. The residents live and work there, but they don't receive a salary.

Each Delancey Street location is a self-contained community, where businesses are operated to keep the program going.

In Brewster, Delancey Street residents operate the Delancey Street Moving Co. and a retail sales department.

The retail operation sells arts and crafts items, such as hand-painted plant holders, made by the residents in Brewster. They sell Christmas trees during the holidays. All profits from the businesses go back into the foundation.

The residents pool their resources to buy the things needed for daily living, from toothpaste to televisions.

Newcomers fresh off the street work their way up through the various jobs at Delancey Street, all the while learning the basic life skills they never could grasp before.

Take Jeffrey Ward, 37, a native of the rough streets of Chicago. He arrived in Brewster in 1995.

"How did I wind up here? I was a drug addict and a heroin addict on the streets of Chicago," he said. "I was doing everything and anything to get and use drugs. I was manipulating everyone I could to get the money to do the things I wanted to do."

Ward is a man of well over six feet and built like a linebacker. It's no surprise to learn he played football in high school. However, his life took a sharp turn for the worse when he started to use drugs. His reasons for starting are familiar.

"I wanted to fit in with my friends. I wanted to be a part of



Jennifer DiConstanzo, who has been a resident of Delancey Street for nearly a year, works in the plants and glass shop making a sand painting that will eventually become part of a plant terrarium.

it. Everybody was doing it, so I wanted to do it."

He was just 15 the first time he shot heroin. "It got to me," he said. "I loved it. This was made for me. My friends liked me. The neighborhood liked me."

The euphoria was eventually replaced by despair, desperation and degradation. The hopeless cycle of addiction took over.

"When you use these types of drugs it really takes over you. Then I didn't like it anymore. Heroin takes over your body. When you don't have it, you get all these aches all over your body," he said, rubbing his arms together as if chilly. "You feel better when you get more heroin in your body. Then it takes over your life."

Ward, like many in Delancey Street, burned every bridge imaginable, went in and out of jails and rehab programs, until finally becoming homeless.

Short-term drug detoxes and rehabs didn't do the trick. Ward said his mind was always on drugs when he was involved in those programs.

"You'd be there during the day and they'd let you out at night," he said. "The night time? That's when addicts are at their best."

Ward hit bottom around 1995. "When no one wants to do anything for you — your family, your friends; when you come and knock on their door and they say they don't want to be bothered; when

you got nowhere to go and no income — you're at rock bottom."

Ward hooked up to the Delancey Street Foundation — named after a street in lower Manhattan where immigrants once huddled — through a Chicago pastor he had known since childhood.

He arrived in Brewster and was interviewed by other Delancey Street residents. They made sure any court or police issues were already resolved. They made sure that Ward didn't have any mental health issues. Then they asked for the one thing Ward had never managed to keep, until then.

His word. Residents promise at the intake interview to give Delancey Street a shot for two years. Many wind up staying at least four years.

"You don't need anything to come to Delancey Street except the clothes on your back," said Glemser, who arrived in Brewster from Philadelphia four years ago. "Everything is supplied for you here. Your cosmetics, your clothes. If you smoke, we provide you with cigarettes."

Once inside the main building — a historic 19th century mansion called "The Castle" — new residents don't trade war stories about life on the streets. They're most likely given a broom and a list of chores.

While sweeping or mopping or shoveling snow, the more expe-

rienced residents whisper in the ears of the new residents, telling them about the foundation and its history.

By the end of their time on a maintenance crew they know the entire history of the property they're cleaning.

Slowly but surely, a foundation is built.

"You have to follow directions, which was something that was hard for us to do before we came here," said Randy Everett, 41, a three-year resident who came to Brewster from New Jersey.

"When we first come to Delancey Street we're babies with a whole bunch of big brothers and sisters," Ward said.

There's no therapy, per se, but there are group meetings where a resident will pick a topic to talk about. One by one, the residents wash the streets out of each other's attitudes.

During a recent visit, about 40 residents sat in an ornate living room in The Castle sipping coffee and smiling while a speaker talked about the importance of the buddy system. No one goes



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Randy Everett, left, is in charge of the retail sales department at Delancey Street. John Glemser, center, is manager of Delancey Street Moving Co., and Jeffrey Ward has left the program, but is a frequent visitor.

## ▷ Foundation offers chance for rehabilitation

it alone at Delancey Street, even the residents who have been there a long time.

"With a lot of drug programs, you sort of sit around the room and talk about drugs," Glemser said. "You hear a lot of people glorifying it with war stories. We help each other. We tell each other about our problems. We point out each other's problems. That seems to work a lot better."

While doing menial work on the maintenance crew, newcomers are also required to get their high school equivalency diploma if they do not already have it.

Eventually every resident learns a job skill. Slowly but surely, self-confidence comes back.

In the basement of another building on the estate are the glass shop and the wood shop, where delicate arts and crafts are produced. It's painstaking, detailed work that takes time to learn. The finished goods are sold by the foundation's retail department.

Other residents work upstairs at the moving company, or do an array of clerical jobs.

Some work their way through the ranks and land managerial positions within the Delancey Street businesses. Glemser, for example, runs the moving company, while Everett is in charge of the retail sales department.

Ward graduated from Delancey Street in 1998 and moved nearby. He works two jobs, one of which is counseling troubled teens at a juvenile detention facility in New York. He comes back to Delancey to offer a ray of hope to the new men and women.

Glemser, meanwhile, came to Delancey Street with a criminal past that included convictions for manslaughter and armed robbery.

He managed to stay clean and sober for eight years after getting out of jail in the early 1990s. He made good money working for an auto parts company. Then

he started to get comfortable.

"I started drinking a couple of beers. Then I was going to the doctor to get pills. And then it was a snowball thing. As an addict, you either do or you don't. There is no in between," he said.

The Delancey Street residents can't say what moment or event caused them to abandon their old ways. All they know is that they're not the same people they once were.

Everett, who used to work in a nursing home, summed up his old life in one sentence: "Heroin is a drug that loves you while you're using it. But as soon as you don't want to use it anymore, it tries to kill you."

Today he said he's responsible and looking forward to eventually landing a job on the outside.

"You become a whole person here," he said. "You can look at yourself in the mirror. Before all you saw was nothing."