

Therapy, Delancey Street Style: Pride, Productivity but No Paycheck

John Maher, the ex-felon who founded Delancey Street, and Mimi Silbert, the petite Ph.D. criminologist who is helping him steer it, have different cultural backgrounds but the same views on rehabilitation. Yes, they say, people *can* change. But not overnight, especially if their lives have been a litany of arrests and jailings. And in 10 years, Maher and Silbert's theory has been proven.

"The criminal's biggest problem is self-destruction — self-hatred coupled with a total lack of self-control," says Maher. Group therapy in prison is a waste. "Is anybody crazy enough to sit down with two Nazis, a Black Muslim, a Mexican Mafia member, a rapist, two psychopaths, and a strangler and say sometimes I have this feeling of weakness and an identity crisis? Of course not. He'd be a

dead person." And most prison jobs are make-work, Maher adds. "So the people just keep hating themselves."

The real recycling process starts with "earning something — self respect," says Silbert. "You can't sit in an encounter group and erase self-hatred by saying 'I feel good about myself and I'm comfortable with you.'" At Delancey Street, it begins with a clean break from the past — drugs, liquor, street pals. Next, six months in "the dishpan," washing dishes by day, playing cathartic group "games" at night. Then there is school; some Delancey Streeters can't read or write when they walk in the door.

After that they go to work either handling some inside job (clerical, staff scheduling) or outside at one of the Delancey Street-owned businesses. Maher says these ventures have twin goals: teaching members a marketable skill while they work face-to-face with straight society; and generating cash that helps fund the Foundation. (Delancey Street says it gets no on-going government grants or public funding.)

Where does the money come from? One Delancey Street company known as Ad Gifts

Specialties sells Bic lighters, pens, mugs, and specialty items to college bookstores coast to coast, and other outfits that buy reminder advertising. The Delancey Street Family Style Restaurant and catering service on Union Street do a brisk business. Other ventures include a moving company, automotive repair garage, a construction and painting business, Christmas tree sales (they had five lots in the City this holiday season). A federally chartered credit union, the first one designed for ex-cons and ex-addicts, makes loans to un-touchables and collects interest on the money. Delancey Street's furniture-making company was relocated from San Francisco to Santa Fe.

The Foundation members work at other odd jobs, as movie extras (if you were filming *Escape From Alcatraz* you'd want real cons, right?), and consulting with community, police, and social service agencies (SFPD has used Delancey Streeters as bogus bandits for training sessions). At the group's annual raffle, a winner might have a dinner for two catered in their penthouse. Pouring the Pouilly-Fuissé could be a smiling sommelier who may have done time in Soledad and now, at Delancey Street, has learned to stop hating himself — C.B.

