

Special N.M. Community Gives Losers 2nd Chance

By DIANA SPERRAZZA

Delancey Street, in one of the tougher parts of New York City's Lower East Side, has long been a first home for immigrants coming to America. The Jews, the Italians, the Poles, and lately the Puerto Ricans have all done their stints on Delancey Street. It remains a stopover in a new world for people in pursuit of new dreams.

Five years ago, New Mexico became the site of another Delancey Street. But this one isn't just a street. Just outside of Espanola, this Delancey Street is a rehabilitation program that is giving 90 ex-convicts and drug addicts — some of society's biggest losers — a serious second chance at life.

"We picked the name because the original Delancey Street was a symbol of self-reliance, of people making it in American culture, and that's what we're all about," Dr. Mimi Silbert, Delancey Street's diminutive but dynamic 40-year-old president says. She has a Ph.D. in both criminology and psychology from the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Silbert is drinking coffee and peering out the window, obviously pleased and proud about the community she and a few others scratched out of the rural New Mexican landscape not so long ago. Taking in the view, she sums up Delancey Street's purpose concisely: "We're like a recycling center. We take society's garbage and recycle it into something better."

Rooted comfortably on a 15-acre former dude ranch restored by residents, Delancey Street is heir to a legacy started more than a decade ago in urban San Francisco.

A well-educated Mimi Silbert, got wind of the program and started running encounter groups for them. She never left. "I never felt so needed," she recalls.

Dr. Silbert worked out a highly successful program that is at once street-wise, pragmatic and compassionate. It reteaches virtually every aspect of life to residents — everything from how to set a table to coping with conflicts with peers.

"Basically what we do is completely re-educate people," Silbert says. "These people are not burn-outs. They are highly energized people. what we do is flip the energy; we don't kill it. We turn it into positive energy."

Positive energy is almost a tangible substance at Delancey Street. You get a strong whiff of it just walking through the gate. Faces that bear the ravages of all kinds of abuses reflect it. The adobe and wood buildings are immaculate but cheerfully lived-in. Residents making



Dr. Mimi Silbert Gives Freddy a Hug

Photos by Mimi Forsyth

lunch laugh and chatter while they work. A group of juveniles, a brand-new addition to the program, are in class, discussing a book they're reading — "Manchild in the Promised Land" — author Clause Brown's saga of growing up in Harlem. Hands shoot up, eager to participate in the discussion. Obviously, they relate well to Brown's jarring journey into manhood.

"Before they came, these were some of the meanest kids in New Mexico; now look at them," Dr. Silbert says, sounding like a proud mother.

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

Delancey Street Program

Sunday, March 21, 1982

New Mexico has a Delancey Street because of Dr. Silbert's extensive energies. She is no stranger to the state and its corrections system. In the early '70s, under the Apodaca administration, Mimi Silbert was part of a governor's council that drew up a model plan for corrections in the state. New Mexico's corrections situation was the most "desperate and tough" she had ever encountered.

"Frankly, I felt that if we at Delancey Street were what we said we were, we better come down here (from San Francisco) as fast as we could," she says.

"People said, 'You'll never make it in New Mexico — that only fueled my fires,'" she says.

Presently, Delancey Street draws its people from a number of sources. They may be ex-convicts, Drug addicts, people on parole, or convicted felons serving a sentence at Delancey Street instead of prison. "Technically, we're open to everyone," Dr. Silbert says, then pauses — she doesn't pull any punches. "That is, anyone who can put up with our very structured, very difficult, very disciplined approach," she adds.¹

For Delancey Street residents, that means getting up at 7 a.m. and putting in eight hours' work, something many have never done before. It means dressing for dinner, endless group meetings that feature Dale Carnegie-like training for improved self-image and success, and total adherence to a strict behavioral code. Residents get a chance to let off steam at two mandatory encounter groups every week, where they can gripe about the program or other residents or get yers of back-logged anger off their chests.

Delancey Street employs no counselors as such. It is a self-help program with those who have completed their official stay, remaining to help others.

No one enters the program without previous screening and a minimum two-year commitment to stay. All drug and alcohol use, as well as physical violence, is forbidden. "We fight for you here, but the second you choose not to do that (follow the rules) we will immediately call the authorities," Silbert says. "We are not anti-law enforcement."

Delancey Gives Losers 2nd Chance

Delancey Street loses about one-fourth of all those who enter the program, Dr. Silbert says. The first three months are especially difficult.

When a person, or immigrant, in Delancey Street lingo, enters the program, he or she is given some clothes, maintenance work, a room to share with five or six other people, and no privileges within the community. For the first three months, no contacts with the outside world are allowed. New residents eat, sleep and breathe Delancey Street.

"We start them at ground zero," Dr. Silbert emphasizes. As attitudes change and a sense-of responsibility develops, residents gain more rights. Like a greenhouse, Delancey Street's environment encourages continual growth.

Mary Carouba, 24, Delancey Street's public liaison, is a transplant from the San Francisco program. Seven years ago she entered the program straight from the streets where she had worked as a prostitute. She had a \$200-a-day heroin habit.

"I was shooting into my neck and legs," she says. "I could barely walk. I got scared." Ms. Carouba heard about the program in jail. "These other women said they would give you three hots and a cot (three hot meals and a bed). That's all we knew. I came to get out of going to prison."

Today Ms. Carouba is a dazzling example of what Delancey Street does best. Bright-eyed, articulate and bubbly, she has not only escaped her past, she has transformed it.

"I used to have terrible feelings about myself. I was turning tricks with old men and I had tatoos all over my body," she recalls. Ms. Carouba exorcised her demons in Delancey Street's encounter groups. "At first, I was totally hysterical. I would just rage. I didn't trust anyone. I would do my best to make everyone hate me," she says, remembering her early group sessions. Tears well up when she talks about Delancey Street. "What changed me was people caring so deeply that it makes an imprint on you. You begin to see it for what it is.

"Nothing gives you hope like seeing a scumbag just like you making it . . . they used to have tracks and tatoos, and here they are, in a three-piece suit," she says.

What makes Delancey Street click, Ms. Carouba says, "is people pulling one another up along with them. You don't just get it for yourself. You reach out and give it to someone else."

Sitting around the table after lunch, Freddy, 20, talks quietly about an emotionally scarred past that left him "like an animal," living on the streets when he was 12. Arrested for strong-armed robbery and credit card fraud, Freddy entered Delancey Street as an alternative to a prison sentence. The first six months, he says were difficult. He didn't know how to let others care about him. "I realized I was in a pattern, and that I had to change.

"Switching it around was rough," he says.

These days, Freddy talks to high school kids about his experiences and his odyssey at Delancey Street. "You explain what you went through and hope they will snap." A seventh-grade drop-out, Freddy now aspires to college. How does he feel about Delancey Street? "It's like I died and went to heaven."

Mimi Silbert embraces Freddy after the interview. She supplies some of the graphic details of the abuse he received at home. Yet there is no pity in her description.

"No matter what happens to you, you still have control and choices," Dr. Silbert says, explaining the potent mixture of love and discipline given to Delancey Street residents. "The first thing we teach is that you must take responsibility for your actions. No one tied you down and injected you with drugs, or made you stick a gun in someone's face: You did that."

Dr. Silbert describes society's treatment of offenders, seeking it as a see-saw that never really balances. "There are these two extremes that battle back and forth," she says. "One of them, I call it the 'Poor Herman' concept, says these people need therapy, that it's not their fault, it's society's. The other says they should be thrown in prison and punished."

Condemning both extremes, she has equally harsh criticism for prisons that allegedly release prisoners without rehabilitating them. "It's a terrible error," she says. "If we don't start giving these people a piece of our pie, they will smash our apples and there will be no pies," Dr. Silbert warns.

The real way out, she says, is teaching people how to succeed in legitimate society. Delancey Street has spawned a number of successful enterprises, including a catering business that regularly serves such groups as the local Kiwanis Club, a bark-planter and terrarium business, a construction company and a wholesale sales marketing business. Such ventures provide essential training for residents, Dr. Silbert says. No one leaves Delancey Street without learning three marketable skills. "We don't want to give anyone an excuse for failure," she says.

The businesses also pay half of Delancey Street's expenses. The other half is supplied by the National Institute of Drug Abuse. Dr. Silbert is unhappy about that situation, and says New Mexico's Delancey Street is aiming to become 100 percent self-sufficient like its San Francisco counterpart.

But Delancey Street does not stop at rehabilitation. Residents are also encouraged to offer some restitution to society for past damage they have inflicted. A row of colored ribbons, trophies and plaques awarded by local community groups and prominently displayed in the main dining room attests to the program's emphasis on public service. "We don't ask them to find the particular victim, and give them back their \$100, but they have ripped off society; they should learn to give something back, to help other people in trouble," Silbert says.

In five years, New Mexico's Delancey Street has graduated 30 people. It has also won praise from some corrections officials. "We use the program as often as we can — they really seem to have a handle on the problem," says Joe Bowlin, chairman of the state parole board.

Ann Yeomans, who works with alternative programs at the Public Defender's Office in Santa Fe, calls the program "very effective; they get people high with work instead of drugs."

Back at Delancey Street, it is late afternoon and Mary Carouba is watching a group of teen-age girls relaxing by the ranch pond. Wistfully, she says she's happy that they found Delancey Street at 15 or 16, instead of later.

"It is so much easier," she says. "You know, it's hard to believe, but sometimes people decide to go back to a locked, gray prison instead of staying here. They can't change. They can't get used to all the love and beauty here," she says. Ms. Carouba smiles. "I don't know if people can understand, but there's really magic here."

Diana Sperrazza is a former KUNM reporter who works as a production assistant in television.