

Rehabilitation center turns opponents into supporters

By Bob McMahon

Staff Writer

It took a simple Christmas light display to help Southeast residents understand the Delancey Street Foundation.

For the first time last December, the 19th-century Tudor-style castle that has housed the rehabilitation group for five years was illuminated magnificently with holiday lights.

Delancey Street members were trying to communicate to the community, said director Steven Toliver, and the response was overwhelming.

"A wonderful traffic jam," said Toliver, his face brightening as he described motorists who thronged Turk Hill Road to get a view of the festooned castle.

Town residents raved about the display and, more important, were finally giving some positive recognition to the castle's occupants, a group of former drug addicts, alcoholics, convicts and prostitutes.

Nearly five years after Delancey Street moved onto the 92-acre Howes Estate in a storm of controversy, the foundation's harshest critics have quietly turned into supporters.

"Those people are as courteous and pleasant as anyone else in the neighborhood," said realtor Edward Heelan, who as vice president of the Turk Hill Civic Association spearheaded the opposition to Delancey Street five years ago.

"Most of the neighbors love us," said Toliver, a 33-year-old ex-convict and rehabilitated heroin addict. "They regularly drive up and commend us because they knew about the flak we were getting."



The 30-room stone mansion and four other buildings on the estate have been restored to their turn-of-the-century luster and neighbors admit none of the imagined horrors of a rehabilitation center have materialized in the affluent Turk Hill neighborhood.

"The concern back years ago was

that they were going to do a lot of things based on a lot of rumors," Heelan said. "There was a lot of hysteria when they came in."

Part of the original bitterness toward Delancey Street came from groups who had plans for the estate when it went on the market in the late 1970s.

The castle was built in 1892 by Seth B. Howes, an American circus entrepreneur and real estate magnate, who named it Morningthorpe Manor after his family's ancestral castle in England.

In 1959, a descendant, Leander Townsend Howes, drew up a will in which the property was to be sold upon



the death of his sister-in-law, Augusta Roote Howes. Citibank, executor of the estate, was to establish a trust for Putnam County Community Hospital — now the Putnam Hospital Center — with the proceeds from the sale of the property.

Mrs. Howes died in December 1978, and the property, which includes a carriage house with a clock tower and two large residences in addition to the castle, went on the market for \$850,000.

In 1979, Stanley Ford of Scout Realty in Brewster offered Citibank \$525,000 cash in order to turn over the castle and six acres to the town for a civic center and to break up the remaining property into four-acre building lots. He made the deal contingent upon receiving conceptual approval from the town Planning Board.

But Citibank notified Ford that a "non-contingent" deal for the same amount of money had come up and the bank was going to accept the offer — from Delancey Street.

Soon after Delancey Street moved in, angry residents of the Turk Hill Association took to the streets with picket signs, complained to the local zoning board and urged the town to condemn the building.

Their main concern was that a full-blown rehabilitation center would shatter the serenity of their neighborhood, with Delancey Street dropouts causing trouble in the town.

A town committee was formed to study the civic center idea but rejected it as too costly. The Southeast Landmarks Preservation Society also lost out on its bid to put the estate on the National Register of Historic Places, which would have made it more difficult to alter its appearance.

Southeast, it appeared, had lost its castle and in return gained an unknown group of former addicts and criminal offenders.

"We were very sad," recalled Eleanor Fitchen, president of the preservation group.

But Mrs. Fitchen and town officials today call the foundation's restoration work to the Victorian structure professional and the rehabilitation itself fas-

cinating.

Last December, the preservation group awarded the foundation a citation for its work and has held tours of the estate.

"It fell into the very best of hands because their program is the rehabilitation of people through the rehabilitation of buildings," said Mrs. Fitchen. "They are all such real people and this is part of their strength. They can live in a castle and take care of it and take care of themselves."

Founded in 1971 by ex-convict John Maher, the foundation takes its name from a New York neighborhood where immigrants settled around the turn of the century. Like immigrants, the members of Delancey Street must learn an entirely new way of life if they are to succeed, according to Maher.

Dr. Mimi Silbert, a psychologist and the foundation's co-president, said Delancey Street was the "quintessential charity organization," taking in people who have ruined their lives and teaching them how to live successfully.

The majority of the foundation's members are sent by judges, parole and probation officers and are prepared for life in the mainstream through communal living, peer-group counseling and vocational training.

Delancey Street facilities — a former Russian consulate in San Francisco, a dude ranch in New Mexico and the Southeast castle — are chosen to provide an atmosphere for rehabilitation through work and recreation, Dr. Silbert said.

Residents of the Brewster castle market specialty items with college imprints such as sweatshirts, mugs and pens, to shops in college towns. The business trains residents in skills like marketing and finance and provides much of the organization's support. Restoring the castle provides training in the building trades.

Toliver said no more than 18 people reside at one time at the estate, the maximum possible under the neighborhood's single-family zoning. Residents have made enough progress in the centers in San Francisco or New Mexico which together house 500 residents — to

allow them to come to Brewster, he said.

Although the foundation "graduates" members primarily from the larger western centers, five people have graduated from the Southeast center in the past year, Toliver said.

They now work in the Brewster area — an accountant, a plumber, a carpenter, a production manager and a sales manager — using skills they learned through working for Delancey Street, Toliver said.

"We want people to grow to responsible roles," said Toliver. "We have to be better than the normal person because we have that mark against us of sometime in our life going down the wrong road."

Dr. Silbert said Americans today are taking a harder line against former criminals, making it vital for the success of Delancey Street to be clearly displayed.

"It's critical to me that this community accepts us," Dr. Silbert said. "Otherwise the message is lost. We have to be looked at and become part of the neighborhood."

Heelan said that Delancey Street can peacefully co-exist with its neighbors as long as it continues to pay property taxes, which total more than \$18,000 a year. The non-profit foundation was denied a full property-tax exemption in 1981 by Southeast Assessor Joseph Zema.

Delancey Street says that its educational function qualifies it for an exemption, but Zema said Delancey Street is not licensed or recognized as an educational institution in New York.

A state Supreme Court judge dismissed an appeal of the town's decision in November 1982. The case is now before the court's Appellate Division in Brook

Toliver argued that the New Mexico and California centers are tax-exempt and are run in the same manner as the Southeast center.

Dr. Silbert said that despite the differences over Delancey Street's taxable status, it was inevitable that the town would accept the castle's tenants.