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They Earn Their Way Back

AS I COMPOSE THESE WORDS, I am spending the night in an institution. In the rooms around me are former drug addicts and pushers, ex-convicts and prostitutes, people with records of conviction for armed robbery and attempted murder. Yet I feel as safe as I ever have.

I am visiting the Delancey Street Foundation, a place that can safely claim to be like no other in the world. The building I am to sleep in—one of two Delancey Street residences in San Francisco, five nationwide—is a mansion on the Pacific Heights that once housed the Soviet consulate. Its residential suites, offices and conference rooms, appointed with decorous furniture and original artworks, look out on a view that sweeps majestically from the Golden Gate Bridge down the bay past Alcatraz.

Normally, only a handful of the very wealthy could afford to live in such splendor. But this house, like all the Delancey Street buildings, was bought and paid for by the people who live in it and run it—onetime drug abusers and felons. Today, they run businesses that make millions of dollars; they take not a penny of government money. One of Delancey Street's 3000 successful graduates sits on San Francisco's elected Board of Supervisors. Others serve as deputy sheriffs and police officers, lawyers and business executives. Nobody, including themselves, ever believed that they would be anything but worthless.

"I was in prison most of my life before I came to Delancey Street," says Abe, an assistant to the foundation's president. "I was in San Quentin for armed robbery." Abe, who had picked me up at the San Francisco airport, is a tall, articulate man, fashionably dressed and physically impressive. If he did not have the style and manners of a college English professor, he might be intimidating. Once, he was. "I was in a prison gang," he recalls. "I was using drugs. I had to turn my life around. Delancey Street helped me to do that." Abe left San Quentin more than a decade ago; today, he spends his life helping others to turn their lives around.

"Delancey Street functions as several opposite things at the same time," explains its president, Mimi Silbert, who holds a doctorate in criminology. "It is a treatment place. It is a vocational school. It has residential and educational facilities that make it like a college in some senses. Because we make our own money by ourselves, it really functions as a business."

Delancey Street was started 16 years ago by a group of former drug addicts



Some of the 350 members of the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco pose with its president, Mimi Silbert.

FORMER DRUG ABUSERS ARE RUNNING A BUSINESS THAT'S MAKING MILLIONS

who borrowed \$1000 from a loan shark for their working capital. From their own experience, they knew that the usual government-financed drug treatment and correctional programs were failing for the vast majority of drug abusers. Silbert signed on to help and suggested a name for the group. Delancey Street was a place on New York's Lower East Side where immigrants congregated at the turn of the century.

"When people first come in here," she says, "we call it 'immigration.' They

are a group of people who don't know how to make their way in American society. Like immigrants, they have to band together, to get strength from supporting each other.

"The first thing we do in immigration is change your image. We break the street and prison image. Everybody gets his or her hair cut short. Women remove all their makeup and the fake jewels that adorn them—almost every woman who comes into Delancey Street, in addition to everything else she's done,

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has been a prostitute. We work from the outside in. If you act like you're okay, like you're a solid and respectable person who has dignity and pride, you'll start to become one."

At "The Club," a converted hotel where most "immigrants" reside, dinner is served at cloth-covered, candlelit tables. Residents come home from work, then dress before eating; many are learning the proper use of utensils for the first time.

A Delancey Street car takes us around the foundation's San Francisco buildings. John, the driver, wears a tweed jacket, button-down shirt and flannel slacks. "I was in San Quentin for attempted murder," he says as he works his way through traffic. "I was paroled and had two parole violations. Two years ago, I was on my way to another. They tested for drug use twice a month, and I was turning in dirty tests. I was desperate for something else."

John arrived at Delancey Street on drugs, and drunk as well. He was made to sit on a bench in the lobby of The Club until he sobered up. "We don't have a formal detoxification program," Silbert says. "We have a living room couch. You can detox from heroin on the couch. It's like having a bad flu. We cook a lot of homemade chicken soup and provide a lot of concern. Then, the second that you look at all functional, you stand up, we stick a broom in your hand, and you sweat out the rest."

Like everyone who comes to Delancey Street, John promised to stay at least two years—and to take part in what is less a drug-treatment program than a life-treatment program. "It isn't enough to say, 'Hello, I'm not a drug addict. Isn't that a great accomplishment?'" explains Silbert. "We don't spend a lot of time teaching people how *not* to be addicts. We hardly ever talk about drugs. We teach them how to have a life." John, who had dropped out of school in the 10th grade, earned his high school equivalency diploma, then worked at Delancey Street's moving company and eventually was promoted to the head office. "I finally have a future," he says.

Mimi Silbert, at 45, is a concentration of energy, capable of operating virtually without sleep and of promoting Delancey Street with a visionary intensity. But even her words pale before the realities we encounter on a tour of the facilities. Delancey Street Christmas Trees does business by phone with corporations like Bank of America and Transamerica, at corner lots throughout the city, its trees and shrubs are sold by people like Laurent, who came all the way from Paris for help in beating an almost-lethal heroin addiction. Here, ironically, he has earned a certificate as a French chef. At a huge old warehouse, Leon, with drugs just 19 months behind him, heads a crew that rebuilds auto engines. Deirdre, an ex-addict, works in a design shop; she has had two gal-

MEN WITH RECORDS AND FORMER PROSTITUTES DEAL WITH FORTUNE 500 COMPANIES DAILY



Sean, a former burglar, works in print shop.



Above: Leon, a former drug abuser, is now head of a crew that rebuilds auto engines. Below: Silbert kisses Joe, once a criminal but today a carpenter.



"WE HARDLY EVER
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lery shows of her art. Brian, in a gray suit and a salesman's smile, sells Delancey Street promotional items to Fortune 500 companies; soon, he will "graduate" to a job on the outside.

"Did you ever do any sales before?" Silbert asks Brian. "It's what I was arrested for," he answers, deadpan.

Delancey Street has spread now to Los Angeles, New Mexico and Brewster, N.Y., and it still has more applicants than it can take. But the need is great. Although she and many of her staff already are working 18-hour days, Silbert has taken on a new project: overseeing the opening of a branch in Greensboro, N.C. The city, which had been the site in recent years of Ku Klux Klan violence, was determined to improve its image. A group of community leaders and law-enforcement officials invited Delancey Street in, and Silbert was unable to turn down the invitation. The Greensboro branch will open soon.

This fall, the foundation also has be-

gun work on a new project on San Francisco's waterfront. With the blessing of the area's building contractors and unions, residents will be taught construction skills and then will help to build a complex of shops, restaurants and housing. Eventually, Delancey Street residents will live in the housing they construct. That required a special act of the California Legislature. "It took two years," Silbert says triumphantly, "but we never give up."

Like every Delancey Street project, this will be self-supporting—though the foundation is soliciting private donations to help with building costs. Until the new complex opens, Delancey Street is filled to its capacity of 350 in San Francisco, 800 nationwide. Since 75 percent of those who begin the program stay on until they graduate to a real job—an average stay of four years—few spaces will be available for new people in the near future.




Silbert and Alicia (II), ex-addict from Spain.

Reaching the Christmas tree warehouse, Silbert leads the way up a flight of stairs to the main office, where a young woman is working the telephone. Her name is Stephanie.

"I started using drugs when I was about 12," says Stephanie. "I came to Delancey Street when I was 27. I lived in the streets, selling drugs or selling something. You can imagine the kind of degrading things one does to oneself to maintain that kind of lifestyle. I thought that was all I would ever be. When I got here, they said, 'You can do it.' But I thought I was hopeless."

All around, people are working, taking orders and turning to Stephanie for guidance. Business for the season recently passed the \$150,000 mark—a record. Stephanie is proud, and she should be. Just five years away from the streets, she now is in charge of the entire operation.

As we leave, I ask Mimi Silbert whether her plan for a new development might not be a little too ambitious. The new housing, after all, will cost about \$25 million, an enormous amount for a self-supporting charitable agency.

"We'll build it," she says unhesitatingly, her face hardening in determination. "We've got to." 

For more information, write: Delancey Street Foundation, Dept. P, 2563 Divisadero St., San Francisco, Calif. 94115.