



RECYCLING PEOPLE

Society's throwaways get another chance to succeed at Delancey Street

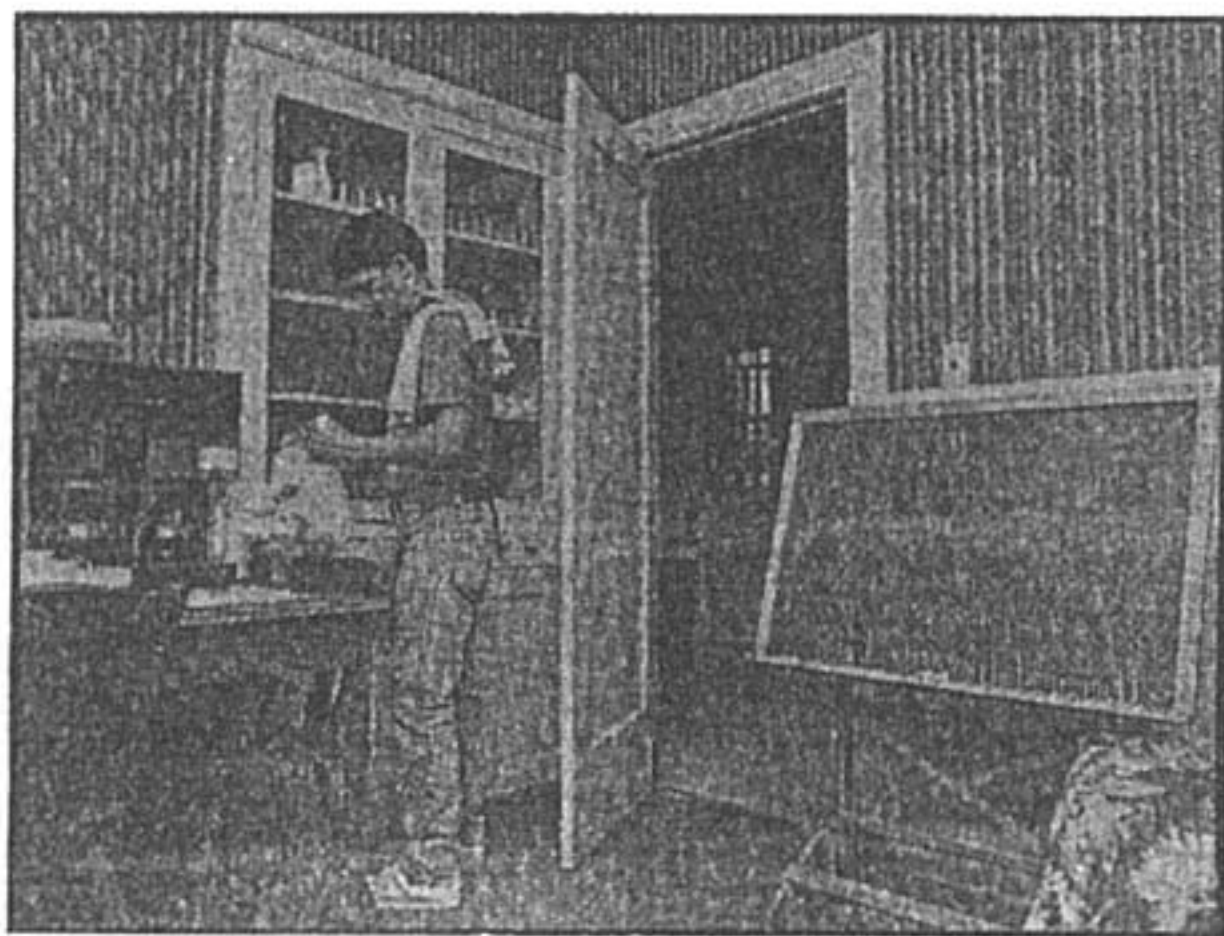
By **CORNELIA GRUMMAN**

Staff writer

GREENSBORO — It's 8 a.m. and an unfiltered sun drenches eight men who tumble out of a beige van. All wear gray polo shirts, jeans and red baseball caps that say "Delancey Street." Quietly, they set to work. Today the men will move, among other things, two bicycles, a barbecue, several fish tanks, wicker furniture, a four-poster water bed, a stereo and an ironing board from Greensboro to Climax.

"We count it as a privilege to do this," says Kevin R. McDonald, a Lech Walesa look-alike who directs one of his movers to go back inside with the mirror he's carrying and wrap it with blankets.

Back at the Delancey Street house, an 81-year-old prairie-style mansion on Elm Street in historic Fisher Park, there is more work to do. One project is restoring the 21-room mansion to its original condition. Jeffrey A. Burko helps Mark E. Kennedy and Bernard C. Phifer prime the living room wall and replace the ceiling molding.



For residents of the Delancey Street program house in Greensboro, rehabilitation is a team effort. Bernard Phifer, top, sweeps walkway to their home in Greensboro. Delancey residents are restoring the 21-room, 81-year-old mansion in historic Fisher Park to its original condition. As they restore the house, the idea goes, they restore their souls. Other residents, far right, help move someone into a house; operating a moving business is one way residents support the program. Carol Cannady, right, makes decorative bark planters that other Delancey residents sell to local businesses. Another resident, above, prepares lunch next to a blackboard that tells residents the 'Word for the Day.'

Staff photos by Cary Allen



Delancey Street a chance for some to begin new lives

In the basement, Carol L. Cannady makes decorative bark planters while four other residents are in Winston-Salem, trying to sell them door-to-door to businesses.

All are former drug addicts, pushers, felons and prostitutes.

They have come to this house, a residential drug rehabilitation/community sentencing program, to work for a new life. As they restore the house, the idea goes, they restore their souls.

"These are people, myself included, who are very self-destructive people. They don't think there's hope of changing," says McDonald, a felon who was sentenced to the program nine years ago and is now director of the Greensboro facility. "We're forcing people to interact. We're teaching people to learn how to vent feelings."

What they're really working for, though, is freedom of choice; they are creating choices for themselves, then developing the confidence to choose among them.

And they're working to be free from something else: a confining world created and ruled by drugs. The 20 residents at Delancey Street are learning there are other ways to cope. Reading, cooking a meal, learning a new word, relying on a friend, yelling and even crying.

"Back then I wasn't free," says James W. Pfahl, 34, who is a Delancey Street resident from Oakland, Calif. "I was always looking over my shoulder. I never knew if the dope I got was bad or if I'd OD [overdose] one day, if someone was going to shoot me one night. That's not free, that's being in prison."

A haven

Delancey Street, named for a New York street that was a haven for immigrants at the turn of the century, is headed by Mimi Silbert, 45, a criminologist and psychologist from San Francisco. Since the first Delancey Street was established in 1971, four more facilities have opened — in San Francisco, New Mexico, New York and, since October, Greensboro.

The program has earned praise from Ronald and Nancy Reagan, California Gov. George Deukmejian and San Francisco Mayor Diane Feinstein.

"I think it's seen as an effective alternative in North Carolina," says Elizabeth C. Crowley, acting director of the N.C. Center on Crime and Punishment, a non-profit group that advocates prison alternatives. "If you can put somebody into a program where they're working and rehabilitating themselves and are paying restitution, I consider that effective punishment."

The goal the minute these people walk in the door is to teach them to walk back out, Ms. Silbert says. This time, successfully.

"That doesn't mean everybody is going to be the nicest kid on the block when they finish this experience," says Joseph Kilpatrick, assistant director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, which provided start-up funds to Delancey Street. "But the history of the program has been that thousands of peoples' lives have been turned around."

Recidivism

Nearly 35 percent of those who enter Delancey Street drop out — usually within the first three months. But of those who make it through at least two years, more than 75 percent go on to lead successful lives, Ms. Silbert says. And, to her, success goes beyond just staying away from drugs.

"We measure all aspects," she says. "Success means they're working at a career and earning money and maintaining positive personal relationships. I even throw in that they maintain some kind of active role in their community — doing something for somebody else."

It costs about \$12,000 a year to incarcerate one person in North Carolina, but Delancey Street uses no government money. Nor does it pay salaries. Instead, it supports itself on the businesses it runs — landscaping, moving, catering, construction, selling handcrafted bark planters, sand paintings and university paraphernalia, selling Christmas trees — and through in-kind donations from local businesses.

"You've got to start people off in positions where they have small successes," McDonald says. "You also get them comfortable with failure."

To get in, you have to admit responsibility for ruining your life. You also have to ask to be accepted, with no help from a probation officer or parents. Then you must obtain a judge's permission.

The rules are simple: one mistake and you're back in jail. A minor mistake and you do the dishes.

"We don't need to humiliate people with stupid stuff," McDonald says. "It isn't that washing dishes is so deep and meaningful, it's just a way to make the person think about what they did."

During the afternoon, Pfahl accidentally left the van keys on the bathroom sink. Tonight, he's on duty.

Kitchen patrol

Newcomers spend the first few months doing menial work, such as washing dishes, weeding and mopping, from 6:30 a.m. to midnight. "You don't have time to think about all your petty little problems when you're working 16 hours a day," says Gene M. Boswell, 33, of Burlington. Boswell, a gaunt man with

tattoos on his arms and forehead, promised to stay at least two years, like everyone else who comes to Delancey Street. He made the commitment in June in lieu of serving a four-year jail sentence for the possession, sale and manufacture of marijuana.

Other residents decide when the newcomer is ready to go off "maintenance." There is plenty to do before "graduation," which usually comes after three or four years. Before that, though, each resident must learn three marketable skills, earn a high school diploma, supervise newcomers and have three months' job experience. As they work their way up the hierarchy, they are rewarded with family visits, a small amount of "walk-around money," dating privileges and private rooms.

The program is not for everyone. In February, one resident walked out the back door after 17 days.

"He came to me and said, 'I can't take it anymore. I'm going to leave,'" says Jeff Burko, 38, an Alexandria, Va., native who has been with Delancey Street for 25 months. "And tears welled in my eyes. I got mad for a minute, but when someone leaves here, I say to hell with him. I have to worry about the new people here."

And three weeks ago, Boswell told his housemates that Delancey Street was getting too hard — he'd rather wait his time out in prison. So he left.

Robert Ward, an assistant public defender in Charlotte, says the program seems best-suited for people who are generally normal, law-abiding citizens when they're off drugs.

"If someone is genuinely repentant and wants to turn his life around, it would seem to be a horrible way to answer that by just throwing them in jail," says Ward, who encouraged current resident John Ponischil of Charlotte to enter the program. "A substantial number of people coming through the criminal justice system have a drug or alcohol problem. There might be a need for two or three Delancey Street-type facilities in the state."

Prison alternatives

Perhaps more than any other county in North Carolina, Guilford has tried to provide a variety of prison alternatives, programs that enable offenders to serve their sentences under close supervision in the community rather than behind bars. But critics of Delancey Street view the program as a radical alternative that could only work in progressive, diverse communities like San Francisco.

Nationwide, the program has more than 750 residents and has to turn away 90 percent of those who apply.

The people at Delancey Street have spent an average of seven years in prison and have been returned three or four times. They have poked their arms with needles, stolen from their families, robbed to support their habit, seen friends get killed, been in violent relationships, considered suicide and have destroyed lives around them. Most dropped out of high school; more than half the members in Greensboro are functionally illiterate.

"What we go after are people at the absolute bottom of the barrel that no one else really wants," Ms. Silbert says. "I always refer to Delancey Street as a recycling center. It's the people who society has really defined as garbage, as real losers. Those are the people we want to take in."

So they arrive at Delancey Street with what is left, and maybe a little hope. What they find there is the belief that anyone can change.

"We teach people how to grow up and have feelings and have scruples and to care. You get some of your self-esteem back; you get pride," Pfahl says. "In prison, they just warehouse you. That's all they do."

Pfahl's is a typical Delancey Street story. By 9, he was taken from his abusive parents and placed in boys' homes. When he ran away at 16 to go home, his mother ended up breaking his arm. So he ran away for good, with only a ninth-grade education and some street smarts. He hitchhiked from odd job to odd job until he was sent to Vietnam.

Story of his life

Pfahl, a solid man with shadowy eyes, browns chicken for 20 as he tells his story.

He began to use marijuana, speed and opium during his three years in the Marine Corps. When he returned to California, he started trading freedom for his habit. For four years he was in and out of county jails on burglary and robbery convictions. He has a former wife and a daughter, Evette, 14, whom he has seen once.

One day Pfahl hit bottom; in a rage, he set his brand-new Buick afire and tore up all his furniture. He was admitted to a psychiatric ward and a drug rehabilitation program.

"I just wanted to fit somewhere," he says. "By the time I was taken to the hospital I wanted to change desperately. I'd done a lot of things to a lot of people. I knew I'd either end up dead or in prison."

Though he is now in Greensboro, Pfahl, was first a member of the San Francisco facility. Since he made contact with Delancey Street 19 months ago, he has learned how to multiply. As head chef, he is training three others how to cook. There's a copy of Gourmet magazine by his bed, and he's working hard on his vocabulary. "My long-term goal is to go to business school," he says.

During today's half-hour lunch seminar, Pfahl gets up and tells everybody about a book he's just read. "I never really read books before," he began, almost apologetically. "You'd have to hide 'em in prison 'cause people would call you a sissy or beat you up. This book's called 'Watership Down.' I loved this book. It was the greatest book I ever read."

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— Mimi Silbert
Delancey Street's head

That evening, everyone has washed up and dressed for dinner. Quietly, they sit down in candlelight at the cloth-covered tables and wait for everyone to be served before picking up a fork.

If this seems overly formal for a group of felons, it is all part of the Delancey Street style. If you live around successful people in a nice neighborhood, the philosophy goes, some of that is bound to rub off.

"When you go outside and see a wino in the gutter, that doesn't give you a lot of encouragement," McDonald says. "But when you go outside and see people who are successful, you start thinking, 'I can be like that too.'"

The rooms are decorously appointed with new furniture, a stereo, framed poster art, hand-sewn curtains, cloth napkins and beds you could bounce a quarter on. It looks like a place to come home to.

"We want people to get involved with us," McDonald says. "We want to give something back to the community. And they do. Since October, Delancey Street members have made more than 90 speaking engagements around the Greensboro area. At Christmas they gave 300 trees to families who couldn't afford them. Regularly they help neighbors with heavy lifting or around-the-house chores.

But it has taken time for neighbors to welcome them. In October, seven members from other Delancey Street facilities moved into the house with only their sleeping bags. They were met with outrage from neighbors who worried about living near two dozen felons and about how their property values would be affected.

There were neighborhood meetings at which a few members got up and told their stories to explain Delancey Street and to convince their new neighbors that they would not be a threat.

Some still aren't receptive to the idea. Behind the house, the owner of the next-door apartments has nailed a bold "No Trespassing" sign to a tree.

But other neighbors are getting involved.

"I went to the neighbors' association meeting that was the chance for Delancey Street to explain their program," said Betty Ruffin, now a regular visitor who lives in a condominium across the street. "At first I was sympathetic with the anger and hostility of the neighbors. But by the end of the meeting, I

really was embarrassed by the reaction of my neighbors. So all I knew to do was to bake some brownies and bring them over the next day."

The doors to Delancey Street are open to Ms. Ruffin and anyone else who wants to make some new friends. At 7 p.m., two volunteers come by for Thursday night tutoring. Within minutes, a rousing spelling contest is under way.

"Spell SOAPY," the tutor instructs Team A. A hand on Team A shoots up. Then, slowly: "S-O-A-P-E-E? No . . . S-O-A-P-I-E? S-O-P-A-I-E?" Team B spells it correctly, and they're triumphant. The score is 10-9, their favor.

Next word. "JUDGE." All 15 hands fly up. Everyone laughs. "Yeah, we all know THAT word!" McDonald booms with a belly laugh.

Fun, funny times

"It's always like this," says Willie R. Joe, 26, a Delancey resident from Greensboro. "We had lost a lot of humor. But we're really trying to get to know each other, so we sit around and laugh."

Tonight, some people study, some write in their journals, others are tutored or put up wallpaper in the foyer. The atmosphere is almost one of relief that they have made it through another day. They are grateful to be there, and grateful to have made it through together.

They laugh. They tell their stories. And when they tell them, it is usually with a smile, like unguarded people who have been relieved of a burden.

Part of Delancey Street therapy is to learn to talk before groups. Tonight, three members in coat and tie head off to tell a Greensboro youth basketball camp about the dangers of drugs.

Later, Mary Hogden, 33, tells McDonald that he has been asked by the Greensboro Civitan Club to give a speech about Delancey Street. "Why don't you do that, Mary?" he asks. Ms. Hogden searches his face, unsure whether to take him seriously, then fumbles over an excuse. "But I think they specifically want you, Kevin."

Two weeks later, Ms. Hogden speaks to the Civitan Club.

Every resident has a story, which is recounted willingly and in exhaustive detail to anyone who cares to know. The stories range from an articulate, well-educated Raleigh woman who fell to drugs while on her way to becoming a successful stockbroker to a drug- and alcohol-addicted boy whose parents had him live out of a pickup camper top somewhere in New Mexico.

Healing process

Telling, at Delancey Street, is healing.

They do a lot of it at their twice-weekly encounter sessions — called "games" — designed to be three-hour open houses for petty feelings and larger frustrations over changing the patterns of their lives.

"We're the type of people, we're so self-destructive, that, boy, we'll give up in a second," says Ms. Hogden, who, every morning for 12 years, shot herself up with heroin, was locked in rooms for days by her husband and, at least twice, was nearly beaten to death by him. "Here at Delancey Street, people aren't allowed to fall down and die. We all need that — other people."

Most residents agree the hardest part about Delancey Street is not all the work, but all the responsibility.

"When I first got here, when I was first on maintenance I thought, 'This has got to be the hardest part,'" said Mark Kennedy, a baby-faced 18-year-old from Fuquay-Varina. "A lot of people were telling me it gets harder as it goes on. It really did get harder."

These days, Kennedy is in charge of watering the lawn and helps Willie Joe from Greensboro come up with the Word of the Day, along with his construction and retail sales work. Since he came, he has also quit smoking and has stopped biting his nails.

The final responsibility, of course, is to leave. For those who have spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends or children, the incentive is strong. But when the time comes, most of the people at Delancey will have nothing to go back to. They'll know a few good skills, yes, and they'll understand a little more about how the world works. The hope is that with such knowledge, they'll head toward the promise of a new and better life.

It is near midnight, and the rest of Elm Street has gone to bed. The moon hangs full and still in the darkness. But inside Delancey Street, all the lights are on. From the street, one can look through the windows and see people moving purposefully among the lights in the house.

There's still work to do.