

National rehabilitation leader celebrates Gate City success

By ANDY DUNCAN

Staff Writer

Within Mimi Silbert's San Francisco office, in a decaying Pacific Heights mansion turned into a showplace by convicted felons, is a file bulging with 6,000 letters from people asking her to set up Delancey Street programs in their areas.

Her stock reply is, "You're welcome to come down here, look around all you like, and steal it."

Silbert says her nationally acclaimed criminal-rehabilitation program simply doesn't have the means to blanket the country, to become the McDonald's of the corrections industry.

Besides, Delancey Street is busy building its biggest project yet, a \$30 million headquarters on San Francisco's waterfront — constructed, staffed and funded by reforming drug addicts and criminals, Silbert's proud army of "losers" on the mend.

Why, the last thing Silbert wanted was to start yet another Delancey Street in a far-flung

place like Greensboro. But repeated inquiries from Greensboro residents changed her mind. And as Greensboro's Delancey Street celebrates its second anniversary, Silbert says she's glad they convinced her.

"I feel so proud I want to burst, I really do," Silbert said Monday, admiring the elegant entrance hall at 811 N. Elm St., the 75-year-old Fisher Park home that houses 25 non-violent offenders. "I'm very proud of all the residents, and I'm proud of the area, because Greensboro has been extremely supportive."

She was pleased by the crowds at Sunday's Delancey Street open house. "People started coming before it had started, and they stayed after it was over," Silbert said. "People saying, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you for being here.'"

When Silbert turned 45 a couple of years ago,

(See Silbert, A11)



Vicki Buckner / News & Record

■ Mimi Silbert, founder of the national Delancey Street program, in front of the Greensboro branch home on North Elm Street

Silbert, From A7

San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein called her "a brilliant combination of intelligence and compassion, steely determination and charm incarnate." She's received letters of praise from Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Jane Fonda has inquired about playing her in a movie.

Her non-profit Delancey Street Foundation is based on the simple premise that offenders live and work together in group homes where criminal rehabilitation blends with vocational training, drug and alcohol treatment, and the bonds of friendship and family.

Delancey Street residents are expected to start pulling their weight immediately, beginning with household chores and eventually progressing to outside jobs. Veteran residents are expected to help the newer ones.

Residents also are expected to learn social skills ranging from formal dress and table manners to carrying on a polite telephone conversation and keeping a guest's coffee cup filled.

"We don't see ourselves as a program," Silbert said. "We see ourselves as an extended family, as a neighborhood. That's why we took the name of a neighborhood."

The original Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of New York has been known as a home for immigrants for generations. Silbert, whose parents came to this country from Eastern Europe, was raised in a similar neighborhood in Boston.

"Everyone worked hard, the work ethic predominated, and hope predominated," Silbert said. "Individual people were able to build and make things happen, and they all took care of each other and helped each other."

"It worked for the immigrants. It worked for the old-time farmers. It's what built America. So it isn't as if we've invented anything. We just went back to what seemed to work and said, 'Let's do that!'"

Silbert earned a doctorate in criminology and psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, and she's spent much of her life working with people law-abiding citizens hope never to see. She started her career at Washington's Lorton Prison, surprising guards and inmates who didn't expect the new counselor to be a 21-year-old woman who stood all of 5 feet high.

Silbert was teaching a course in criminology at Berkeley in the early '70s when she was contacted by John Maher, a reformed heroin addict with ideas for a novel rehabilitation program that would be run by residents themselves. Delancey Street grew from there.

Now the foundation's various business operations, including Delancey Street Movers, finance the Greensboro group home and the bigger homes in California, New York and New Mexico. The foundation takes no government money.

"Oh, once we became successful, we were offered grants," Silbert said. "People called all the time. But we are trying to teach our own people self-reliance and a sense of responsibility."

"We say there's only one way that this organization is going to continue, day to day and year to year, and that's if you learn a skill and go to work and *make* it work. If the residents don't bring the food in, we don't eat."

Delancey Street demonstrates that traditional American values still can work today, even among outcasts that society has given up on, Silbert said.

"This is not just a model for people with problems, but I think it's a model for people, *period*," Silbert said. "We're not just helping individuals. We're proving a point."