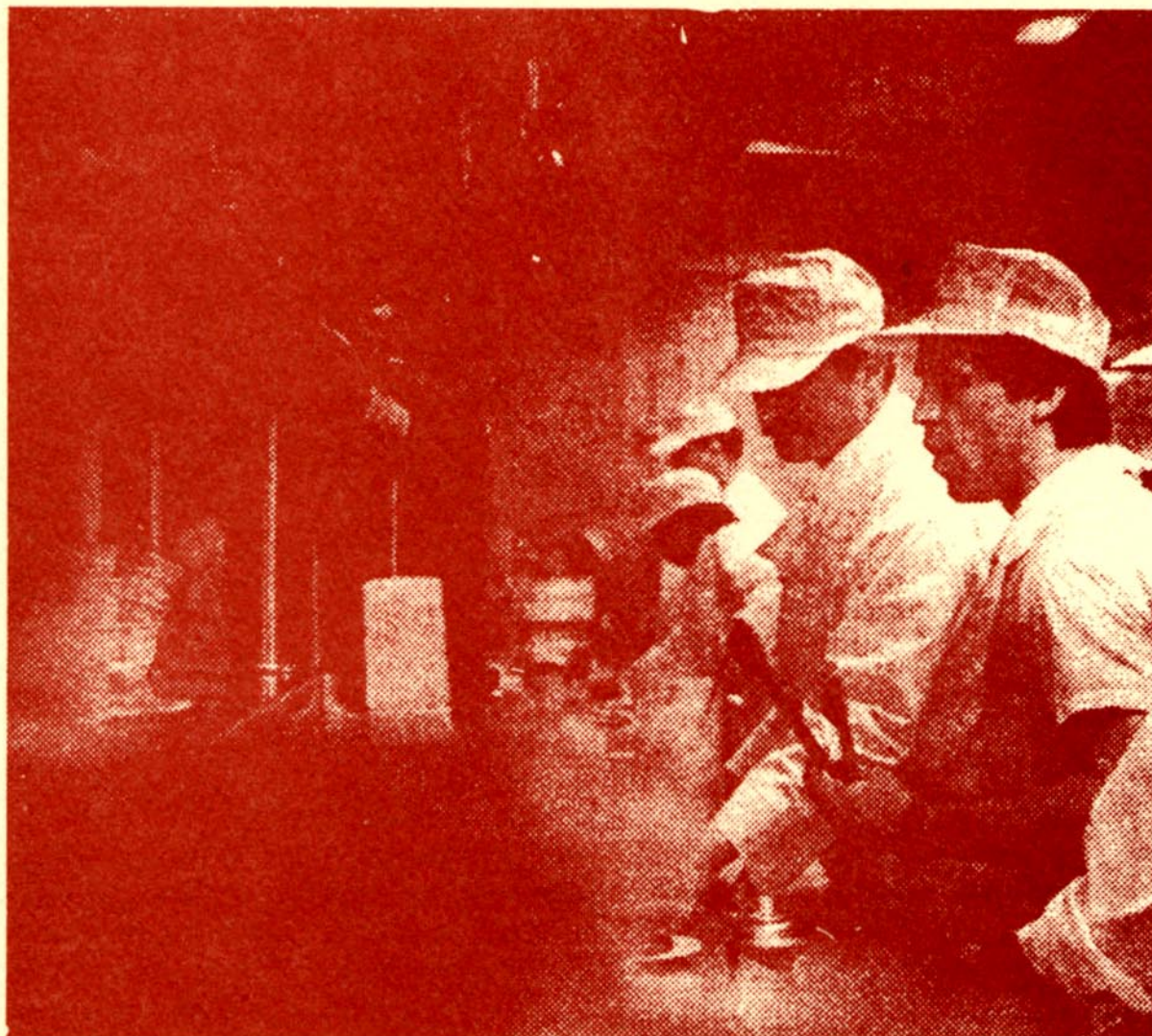


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Chefs preparing lunch at a San Francisco restaurant operated by the Delancey Street Foundation, a 20-year-old self-help organization that resurrects hard-core criminals and addicts by teaching them work habits, values and skills. The foundation accepts no government grants.

Ex-Convicts Are Serving Blintzes Instead of Time

By JANE GROSS

Special to The New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 17 — San Franciscans are dining these days at a new restaurant where the chefs used to be junkies, the waitresses prostitutes, the busboys burglars and the wine stewards pimps.

The restaurant is the newest enterprise of the Delancey Street Foundation, a 20-year-old self-help organization that resurrects hard-core criminals and addicts by teaching them work habits, values and skills.

What happens at Delancey Street goes beyond theory and therapy and is grounded in the marketplace of profit and loss. When the new restaurant got a mixed review in the local newspaper, people in the kitchen wept. And when lunch one day last week broke a record with \$4,000 in sales, they erupted in rowdy celebration.

Like the Delancey Street businesses that opened before it, the restaurant is intended to provide job training for residents and income for a rehabilitation program that accepts no government grants. Residents also operate a moving company, Christmas tree lots and a print and copy shop.

They also built the splendid waterfront apartment and retail complex where they live, work and tend to every detail of operation, from cleaning the

No longer locked out of the system of making an honest dollar.

swimming pool and shining the brass banisters to balancing the books and running the movie theater's projector.

In all, Delancey Street businesses here earned \$6 million last year, said Mimi Silbert, who manages the foundation with no professional staff.

Building the apartment complex, under the tutelage of a few professionals, prepared many Delancey Street residents to get contracting licenses. Eight of the project foremen are now working "outside," one with his own construction business.

Like each new Delancey Street business, the restaurant is a work in progress, an improvisation. Ms. Silbert gathers the recipes — an ethnic grab bag that includes hot links, blintzes and chicken mole. She teaches the preparation to a couple of residents who in turn teach a couple more.

The things that Ms. Silbert cannot teach herself are taught by outside

experts, many from the city's finest restaurants. The chef from Postrio showed the novice restaurateurs how to buy and handle produce, while his counterpart from Roti revealed the mysteries of a complicated, imported rotisserie.

But help comes from less predictable sources. The mother of a former resident gave a seminar on sweet potato pie. And when a local reviewer complained that a sandwich was prepared with "hard and dry" Hobbs Shore bacon, Ms. Silbert called the owner of the bacon company, who demonstrated how to cook it right.

"If you have no false pride, people are wonderful in helping you learn," said Ms. Silbert, a criminologist and psychologist.

Moving Up the Ladder

The residents who were washing dishes when the restaurant opened in October were quickly promoted to food preparation and those on the prep line are now chefs. This "ladder" principle prevails at Delancey Street, where anyone who knows a little teaches someone who knows less, like the resident with an eighth-grade education who teaches fifth-grade reading.

Everyone at Delancey Street, where the average stay is four years, must get a high school equivalency diploma

and learn three skills, one involving physical labor, one involving clerical or computer skills and one involving interaction with other people.

Typical are Robert Rocha and Shirley LaMarr, former heroin addicts who have been in prison several times, Mr. Rocha for armed robbery and Ms. LaMarr for prostitution and burglary. Both came to Delancey Street at the urging of the court to avoid another sentence, which is the way most of the residents get there.

Mr. Rocha, whose mother and sister are both in prison, learned eight construction trades while working on the new building and now works in the criminal justice department, interviewing new residents. He is taking college courses in criminology and teaches high school geometry to residents studying for high school diplomas.

Ms. LaMarr, whose son is in prison and whose mother and daughter are both prostitutes, runs the maintenance department, supervising the often-surly newcomers who mop floors to a military sheen. She is about to learn to drive an 18-wheeler, a skill Ms. Silbert encourages because truck-driving jobs are plentiful and highly paid.

Delancey Street is not a drug rehabilitation program, per se, Ms. Silbert often says, although all its residents are former addicts. More important, Ms. Silbert said, is that they are entrenched members of the underclass, with no clue how to live, work and succeed in the American system. In this, she compares them to immigrants of another generation, who helped themselves and each other on the original Delancey Street in New York City, the program's namesake.

The Delancey Street vocational program evolved more by accident than design. The foundation, begun to help addicts, set up shop 20 years ago in a house in Pacific Heights, an elegant San Francisco neighborhood where the newcomers were unwelcome. Eager to win people over, Ms. Silbert volunteered the residents for any physical work the neighbors needed. The first request came from a society matron who was holding a benefit and wanted her living room cleared of furniture.

Watching one muscle-bound resident move a piano, Ms. Silbert said the proverbial light bulb went on over her head. "We needed a way to earn money and teach skills," she said. "We didn't have much to offer, but we had those arms."

She printed fliers that said: "Moving? We'll do it for less." When the first call came, she noted the particulars of the move, offered to call back with an estimate, telephoned an established mover to get a price quotation and finally offered a better deal.

The thrill of the restaurant, unlike the moving company, is that it defies stereotypes about what ex-convicts can do. "We're showing that we can be charming and make scones," Ms. Silbert said.

Over the years, as Delancey Street earned national acclaim, Ms. Silbert brushed aside requests from groups eager to duplicate the program, inviting them to "steal what you want," but not investing much time in helping them.

Plan to Teach Theory

But now she plans to open an institute and teach both the broad theory and the details of what she is doing. "Such a cluster of horrors are happening to people at the bottom of our society," Ms. Silbert said. "It's no longer right not to try."

Ms. Silbert expects two related problems for Delancey Street imitators. If they take grant money, the residents will not feel that survival depends on the success of their business ventures. And, if they use professional staffs, the residents will not be fully responsible for all facets of their daily life.

"All the things you do to make it safe, like funding and staff, make it more difficult to bring people into the process in an ownership fashion," Ms. Silbert said. "You must rely on the people who are the problem to be the solution."
