

ANY QUESTIONS? MIMI SILBERT

Twenty Years Among Addicts

SINCE 1972, MIMI SILBERT HAS HEADED SAN FRANCISCO'S Delancey Street Foundation, a drug- and crime-rehabilitation center. In the spirit of a tight-knit immigrant community, residents at Delancey operate catering, moving and furniture businesses. We talked with Silbert about her program and national debates over addiction and rehabilitation.

Q: You view addicts and felons as "immigrants" who, even when native-born, must be taught how to make it in this country. Why?

A: My parents immigrated from Eastern Europe, and I grew up in an immigrant neighborhood in Boston. What struck me then was the mobility—everybody making that American dream happen. When I started working in prisons, it struck me how trapped, hopeless and cynical these people were. The most important thing for me is to give them that [newcomer's] sense of hope, of mobility, that sense that everything is possible.

Q: What do you mean when you say that Delancey works from the outside in?

A: Most therapy works from the inside out—if you understand your problems, then you'll change your behavior. We work the exact opposite way. We ask our residents, if at first it doesn't come naturally, to "act as if." Act as if you care about someone else. Act as if you really are an executive at IBM, even though you feel absurd with this tie strangling your neck and you know there are all these tattoos hidden underneath your suit. You don't know what's hidden underneath the suits of all those other people!

Q: At Delancey, ex-cons and addicts teach and counsel other ex-cons and addicts. Why?

A: Rather than have a "program" with a paid staff—"experts" treating "patients"—our philosophy is, "each one teach one." When you're worrying about somebody else being decent and not lying and not giving up—when you're teaching them how to fight—eventually, because you're saying it so much, you come to believe it yourself.

Q: How are you dealing with the crack epidemic?

A: We're probably the only program that doesn't make a distinction among people who use crack or heroin or cocaine. Quite frankly, the people who come here will put any drug they can get their hands on anywhere they can put it. And likewise, in treatment, it makes very little difference what drugs they use.

Q: But do you care what triggers addiction?

A: No. Whatever causes addiction, you can still teach people to live drug-free, crime-free, with pride, with success, with excitement. I'm not really a drug expert. I'm a drug-free expert.

Q: What do you make of the government's so-called war on drugs?

A: I don't understand the concept of a "war." People are correctly outraged about our drug and crime problem. But we have led them to believe that if we only send enough people to prison the problem will stop. It won't. The years in which we've incarcerated the most people are the years in which our crime rate has been the highest. At some point, we're going to have to teach these people to live a different kind of life.

Q: How do you feel about legalizing drugs?

A: From top to bottom, inside and out, I'm opposed. I can barely discuss it, because it's an emotional issue for me. I've lived among drug addicts for almost twenty years, and I find it unconscionable even to think about legalizing drugs. These people simply have no life while they're loaded on drugs.

—KATHERINE KAM



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