



BY TOM LEVY/THE CHRONICLE

Mimi Silbert, president of Delancey Street Foundation, on the balcony of the new \$14 million headquarters on the Embarcadero. Hollywood producers are interested in her story.

Mimi Silbert Stays Tough for Delancey

BY RUTHE STEIN

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Mimi Silbert, president of Delancey Street Foundation, was showing the foundation's new \$14 million headquarters on the Embarcadero — soon to be home to 350 one-time drug addicts, felons, prostitutes and derelicts — to a coalition of homeless people.

Silbert shepherded the group through the Mediterranean-style complex of apartments, each with its own balcony or flower box, and shops, pointing out the movie theater, health club, Jacuzzi and heated outdoor pool.

The list of amenities made her laugh.

"Our whole pitch is how tough life is at Delancey Street, how you have to start at the bottom," she told the group. "Now that we have this building, how are we going to make that convincing? It is difficult to ex-

plain that (residents) are still struggling — damn it."

The struggle is admittedly different now than it was in 1971 when the organization was founded by the late John Maher on the premise that nobody was too down and out to be rehabilitated. Then the struggle was for recognition.

Now Delancey Street has become almost too well known. Since "20/20" aired a segment in December on the lavish new headquarters, built almost entirely by the residents, Hollywood producers have been after Silbert, 47, to let them make a movie about this incredible success story.

Representatives for Jon Peters and Peter Guber of "Batman" fame were so delighted when Silbert finally returned their call that they sent flowers to her three secretaries. Freddie Fields, who produced "Glory," has flown to San Francisco twice to see her.

Silbert's response to being wooed by

Hollywood exemplifies how unswayed she is by celebrity, as well as her know-how in making the most of every opportunity.

She has been through this before and learned that financing for a film about a rehabilitation program is hard to come by. Jane Fonda — "Janie," as Silbert calls her — had the rights to the Delancey Street story for four years. She wanted to play Silbert but was unable to get the project off the ground.

So Silbert listened to what these Hollywood hotshots had to say and then sweetly asked them whether they would consider screening some of their upcoming movies for distributors at the Delancey Street facility.

Her idea in creating a state-of-the-art screening room was to make money from renting it out. She also hopes to be able to hold onto the films for a few days to show

Delancey Street Is Her Family

Silbert says her work is also her love

them at benefits for Delancey Street.

The second time Fields came courting, Silbert convinced him to talk to Delancey Street residents, many of whom are minorities, about the making of "Glory," which deals with the heroics of black soldiers during the Civil War.

She Holds It Together

Much of the success of Delancey Street, which brings in \$6 million a year through its homegrown moving company and catering, printing and wholesale marketing businesses, derives from its president's creative finagling.

Silbert, who has doctorates in criminology and psychology from the University of California at Berkeley and who studied philosophy in Paris with Jean-Paul Sartre, became involved with Delancey Street in the early '70s after falling in love with its mercurial founder, Maher. They lived together for 10 years, and he helped raise her twin sons from an early marriage.

In the mid-'80s, Maher, a child alcoholic, began drinking again and resigned from the organization. He died of a heart attack in 1988 at 48.

Delancey Street did not fall apart when Maher did, largely because of Silbert, who was Maher's co-president for years. It was her drive that got the new headquarters built against all odds.

Build It Yourself

Almost all the actual building was done by residents, saving an estimated \$16 million. At most, 10 of the residents had done construction work before, and the most experienced among them learned what he knew pouring concrete for the handball court at San Quentin.

Silbert convinced the Bank of America to give the foundation a



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Mimi Silbert, who devotes all of her attention and as many as 15 hours a day to Delancey Street, drinks tea to keep going.

\$10 million unsecured loan, and also talked local unions into training her people, who then train others at Delancey Street.

"The only way to do this building was to talk it into existence," she said. "I was very chesty. I would have meetings with people and they'd say things like, 'How can your bozos really do this? This takes skill.' And I would get outraged and say, 'Absolutely. We'll be able to learn.' But secretly I was in terror.

"We have a saying at Delancey Street about everything, which is to 'act as if.' We say to our people, we know you don't know how to speak, but just walk around saying 'please' and 'thank you' and if you act it long enough, you will become a person who talks that way.

"So we were all marching around this absurd site, you know, with buildings and stuff on it, saying, 'Oh, yeah, we'll pull this down and then we'll drop those piles.' Every one of us was acting as if, and every one of us knew that the others were acting as if we knew what we were doing, and then eventually we convinced ourselves."

Silbert, who is 5 feet tall and weighs 95 pounds, got behind the bulldozer and pulled the last building down herself.

"Whatever the people at Delancey Street do, I try to do. These people have never seen what a boss is. When you're on the bottom, you have this distorted view that the people at the top don't do anything."

"I don't date. I had probably the best relationship I can think of in which we shared a life and a dream. Since John died, I have been just completely consumed with getting our new complex done."

That has almost been accomplished. Delancey Street residents are putting the final touches on the building and hope to move in at the end of this month. Silbert will live there as well.

Room for Growth

The primary reason for the move is to allow for growth. The new complex will house 700 residents, twice the number the organization can now accommodate. More than 90 percent of the applicants have had to be turned away from the foundation's three other buildings in San Francisco, Silbert says. Two of them have been sold, and the Divisadero building will house administrative offices.

"When you see yourself saying no to almost everybody, it is horrible. It would have been the death of us, absolutely. Without the space, we couldn't have kept going, because the biggest problem we fight in Delancey Street is hopelessness — the feeling that everything is bull— and nothing is ever going to work out.

She says that the design of the headquarters — only the retail space is visible from the street, and the apartments are hidden — was inspired by places she had seen in Europe.

"They are lovely from the outside with the flowers and flower boxes, and then you look inside the courtyard, and there is a mother shrieking with frying pans and kids. That's exactly it. Inside, I'm going to be shrieking to the residents, but it will be all peaceful and beautiful to the street."

Now that her sons are away at college, her Delancey Street fami-

ly gets all the attention. Silbert, who often works 15 or more hours a day, acknowledges that she doesn't have much of what other people would call a personal life.

"But I don't think of Delancey Street as a job, so to me that is a personal life. I do go to plays and to the museum and to restaurants, but when I do those things, I bring with me a few Delancey Street people. Then I have the terrific opportunity of not only seeing the play, but seeing someone see a live play or eat Chinese food for the first time in their lives.

"It is our people who have to turn people away. We don't have a staff. It isn't like social workers saying no to clients. So our people say to themselves, 'Somebody gave me a chance, and I'm not giving someone else a chance,' and that leads to despair and despair is our biggest enemy."

The space will finally allow Silbert to do something that has been on her agenda for years: teach people outside Delancey Street the skills that have made the foundation so successful (it boasts a success rate of close to 90 percent). She has already started. The coalition of homeless people hopes to put San Francisco's street people to work building homes for themselves.

The new headquarters are tangible proof of Delancey Street Foundation's mission, Silbert says.

"That people who have never done anything, people who always thought they couldn't do anything, people who have been destructive their whole lives can actually build something physical and see it. We have guys that just break down crying, saying things like, 'For the rest of time these walls are going to be here, and I put them up.'

"It is just extraordinary. I mean, we can't get over it ourselves."