



Mimi Silbert talks with UMass education school counselors Ronald Fredrickson (left) and Charlie Braun.

Woman finds teaching life skills key to reforming convicts, addicts

By Jean Caldwell
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

AMHERST — Mimi Silbert grew up in the 1940s in an immigrant family in Mattapan, where dinner-table conversation revolved around how to make the world better.

Today at 49, Silbert, a 5-foot, 95-pound dynamo, is credited with having taught 10,000 of California's most hardened criminals and drug addicts how to turn their lives around over the past 20 years by helping each other. She has done it, she says, by creating a family.

"It sounds weird to say a thousand violent ex-felons and serious drug addicts — illiterate, unskilled people — living together is the same as my warm and actually quite educated and cultured family, but in spirit they are exactly the same," she insists.

Silbert has fought to change California laws to open opportunities for graduates of the San Francisco-based Delancey Street Foundation, which she heads.

"We got the first ex-felon admitted to the bar, the first to get a real estate license, the first to become a deputy sheriff. We fought to get ex-felons the right to vote. Each first opens a door through which hundreds of people go," she says.

Delancey Street graduates can be found in all kinds of jobs. One is an elected member of San Francis-

co's Board of Supervisors, another the appointed head of the city's Housing Commission.

Silbert spent a week recently on the University of Massachusetts campus as a distinguished alumna, lecturing to classes on education, counseling and criminal justice.

Her message: Throwing criminals in prison does nothing to change their behavior. Teaching them how to be decent human beings by helping each other can turn them into good citizens.

Silbert decided self-help was an answer to the problem of chronic criminals while working in prisons as she studied for her doctorate.

"I saw pretty quickly the institutions weren't set up to teach people," she said.

Contrary to the widespread middle-class belief, the thought of prison is not a deterrent to most serving time, according to Silbert. Criminals who are tough gain status and importance in prison, she says.

"Kids in gangs are dying to show they are big enough and tough enough to make it into whatever the tough prison is, the same way some nice little kid wants to go to Harvard or UMass," she insists.

Silbert says 80 percent of those who enter Delancey Street go on to graduate. "We teach you absolutely everything you need to make your life work without drugs or crime, successful at every level."

New arrivals instructed

Residents teach new arrivals so that every Delancey Street resident earns a high school equivalency diploma. They learn vocational skills in physical labor such as auto mechanics, construction, or truck driving; or office skills, such as computers or bookkeeping. In addition, residents go to the opera, symphony concerts and art museums.

"We teach people how to dress, how to set a table, how to order in a restaurant," says Silbert. "If you are going to teach people how to live in the middle class, there has to be something you do after you get there so you feel comfortable."

Delancey Street has three inviolable rules: no physical violence, no threats of physical violence, no drugs or alcohol.

Silbert once decided the only way to get the \$30 million apartment and shopping complex they needed for expansion was to build it themselves on a prime section of San Francisco waterfront.

"We put up many walls that came out wrong," Silbert recalls. "We were training people and it was important for them to see physically what we had been trying to teach them emotionally about life."

"OK. It's crooked. So what are we going to do? Take the wall down and we'll put it up again."

Today Delancey Street has a \$7 million budget raised by residents who run a restaurant, a national

moving company with 35 trucks and diesel vehicles and other businesses to keep it afloat. There is no staff except Silbert and no government funds are accepted. There are satellite operations in Los Angeles, San Juan Pueblo, N.M., Brewster, N.Y., and Greensboro, N.C.

"Bottom of the barrel"

Silbert deliberately looks for people nobody else wants. One-third of the residents are homeless; two-thirds are repeat offenders who have spent 15 years in prison. Most have been using drugs for a dozen years and have never worked as long as six months in a row. They are violent people: murderers, armed robbers.

Silbert's work has been praised by "60 Minutes," "20/20" and Reader's Digest. She has had 2,000 requests from people who want to replicate the program and plans to set up a training institute to make this possible.

While she was at UMass, a former official of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections who wants to start such a program met with her.

Despite California's massive prison building program and budget crunch, Silbert says the state is putting up money for the project because it has finally acknowledged it has to get people out of prison and into the community "so they can learn how to be different so they won't be coming back."