

# SAN FRANCISCO FOCUS

MARCH 1991

## REMARKABLE WOMEN

### Mimi Silbert

#### REBUILDING LIVES

**H**ow does a woman five feet tall handle several hundred felons, hard-core drug addicts, thieves, killers? With a one-two punch. One: teach them to read and write, and *all* the behaviors needed to make it in mainstream society—job skills, how to “talk middle-class,” read contracts, understand opera and great literature. Two: teach them to take risks, to believe in themselves, to care for and teach each other, to love and trust. A far harder lesson.

“A tough belly and a crazed vision” have fortified Mimi Silbert through nineteen years as head of the Delancey Street Foundation, which Dr. Karl Menninger called “the best and most successful rehabilitation program in the world.” Delancey Street has turned around thousands of people society had given up on, people who had led lives of gut-wrenching hopelessness and violence. Today some hold jobs as teachers, doctors, corporate executives, and police officers.

“It’s the finest program I know of for rebuilding lives,” says former San Francisco police chief Frank Jordan.

The program has now spawned other Delancey Street homes nationwide, and the US Justice Department has been impressed enough to study it as a model for their own rehab efforts. Silbert also serves on the California Board of Corrections.

The group’s crowning glory has gained nationwide media attention: with no construction experience and no money, the members themselves built a thirty-mil-



lion-dollar, three-acre complex of living space, shops, restaurants, and a fitness center on San Francisco’s waterfront.

It’s not all glory, of course. Silbert has to walk a thin line between “staying open and caring and believing and being tough enough to help.” Those who don’t make it here will probably die on the street. She’s seen it happen time and again.

She has to be Mama Mimi, head of her extended family. Teacher of Shakespeare, auto repair, table manners. Student herself, in hard hat and high heels.

Why does she do it? “I don’t understand,” says Silbert with a blast of energy and joy, “why everyone else doesn’t.”

Sure, sometimes there’s betrayal, pain, anger, disillusionment. But the rewards come like bolts of lightning. “It’s unbelievable to see forty-year-olds, coming from despair, regaining childlike wonder, getting hope, learning how to care for the first time. That moment of wonder, this little miracle of a person taking a leap toward something they never thought they could do. There’s nothing more wonderful.”

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