

# The Boston Globe

## Serving up a second chance

Former criminals staff San Francisco restaurant to gain work and social skills

By Jane Meredith Adams  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

**S**AN FRANCISCO — The waiters, waitresses and chefs at the Delancey Street Restaurant here have an air of gentility and gracious competence as they offer their cucumber sandwiches and salmon mousse.

But this staff is not what it seems. It consists of former thieves, prostitutes, drug dealers, pimps and other lawbreakers taking part in a dramatic and successful rehabilitation program.

The restaurant is the latest venture of the Delancey Street Foundation, a 21-year-old residential self-help program that accepts no government funding and instead supports itself through its own businesses and private donations. The foundation, which houses 500 residents in San Francisco and has built itself into a multimillion-dollar operation, imparts middle-class attitudes about work, speech and dress to people much of society has abandoned.

"Everybody here is just like me: drug users, people who have been in the criminal world most of their lives," said chef Robert Smittle, 43. He came to Delancey Street on a work-release program in lieu of serving an eight-year prison sentence for armed robbery and kidnapping. "We're tired of that lifestyle, the running and the



**MIMI SILBERT**  
Teaching responsibility

drugs and the hurting people. We want to change."

The change is so convincing that patrons sometimes find it difficult to believe that their waiter or waitress is actually a Delancey Street resident.

"They'll give you the look — really?" said Donnese Brown, 24, who came to Delancey Street three years ago after hitting bottom in a drug house. "I told this lady I'd been a prostitute since the age of 12. She said, 'No!' If she'd seen me before, she would have believed it."

The best standards are expected at the restaurant, from the white table-

cloths to the fanned arrangement of the grilled chicken on an afternoon high tea plate. Residents largely built the building, learning how to hammer and weld from union workers who donated their time. The airy restaurant is on the waterfront, with a stunning view of the Bay Bridge.

Residents, who pay no fee, stay an average of four years, "like Harvard," said the Delancey Street president, Mimi Silbert. They are outfitted with new, conservatively styled clothing and told that "ain't" isn't proper grammar. They work their way from living in a dorm room to an apartment worth \$2,000 a month.

"We've proved that the absolute worst of the population is capable of the best of what's possible in our society," Silbert said.

Silbert, who grew up in Dorchester and Brookline, Mass., says her extended Jewish family is the model for Delancey Street — a safe place where people feel free to blurt out their feelings but also must take responsibility.

Her father, who owned President's Pharmacy in Quincy, Mass., was "a genuine lover of people," she said. Silbert seems to have inherited that trait. Voted "nicest girl" in the class of 1959 at Brookline High School, she has a knack for believing in people and making others believe in her, like the loan officers at Bank of America. They agreed to an unsecured loan to help fi-

nance the restaurant and apartment complex.

After graduating from the University of Massachusetts in 1963 with a degree in English, Silbert went on to the University of California at Berkeley, where she earned a doctorate in criminology. She founded Delancey Street with her late husband, John Maher, a rehabilitated convict, drug addict and alcoholic.

Silbert said Delancey Street offers a proven program for change. "It's a model that doesn't require experts and doesn't require lots of funding," she said. Instead, the people society thinks are the problem can provide the solution.

In response to the recent Los Angeles riots, Silbert is leading training sessions dealing with the techniques of the foundation, which operates the San Francisco residence and houses an additional 400 residents in smaller programs at San Juan Pueblo, N.M., Brewster, N.Y., and Greensboro, N.C.

"It's a great program," Judge Leonard Louie, presiding criminal division judge in Superior Court in San Francisco, said of the Delancey Street Foundation. "From my experience, the success rate is high. I don't see them back in my court" for the most part, he said.

Said Smittle, the chef: "This is a one in a million chance for a guy like me to get his life together."