

# SF WEEKLY

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## On the mend at Delancey Street

**T**HEY LOOK AT FIRST GLANCE LIKE MEMBERS OF AN Amway sales team, or perhaps a new breed of multicultural stockbrokers. Then you notice the harshness sketched into their faces — the scar near one man's temple, the little tattoo under another one's eye — and the broadness of the chests and arms scrunched into the white shirts and suits. The four men gathered in a wood-floored dining room just off the Embarcadero have lived hard lives, shaped by violence. But for the last few years, there's been a new force in their lives called Delancey Street.

Over the years, they've robbed and beaten, boosted cars, assaulted cops and committed countless burglaries; between them they've spent more than 40 years in prison. As Frank DeLeon, a stocky 35-year-old from Texas, put it, "I was Three Strikes You're Out by the time I was 17."

If the Three Strikes law signed last week by Gov. Pete Wilson had been in effect when these men last went before a judge, they'd be in prison today — and for much, if not the rest, of their lives. Instead, they're on the mend, clean and sober, residents and workers at Delancey Street.

Since the early 1970s, offenders of all stripes have

been coming to the organization to take part in its unique and successful blend of therapy, hard work and community life. The self-sufficient operation earns revenue from its businesses — a restaurant, moving company and commercial printer, to name a few.

Robert Rocha, a baby-faced Latino from San Diego, has been at Delancey Street for five years, and now is part of the intake team that interviews inmates in prisons. "By the time I was 15, I had 27 armed robberies," he says.

Rocha grew up around drugs, crime and violence. He never knew his father; his mother was an addict who was in and out of prison herself. He started using heroin at the age of 13, after his mother had been sent off to prison and he was living with relatives in San Francisco's Tenderloin.

For young men in the world where Rocha ran, deterrence was not a factor. "Once I turned 18, jail was just part of what you did. You didn't think about 'What if I get busted?' 'cause that's like showing fear. It's all about status."

The goal for Rocha was to end up at "the hardest, meanest, toughest prisons," places like San Quentin. "I thought going to San Quentin was like going to college. It's a place to pump some iron, hang out in the

yard with some homeboys, watch some TV. You don't have to be responsible, you just get loaded. Every once in a while, you might have to stab somebody."

In 1988, at the age of 22, Rocha caught a break. An attorney who cared about his future stuck her neck out with a judge. "She saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself," he recalls. She arranged for him to go into Delancey Street.

At first, he says, the place was a scam to keep from going back to prison, which had lost its romantic appeal. So he went along with the program, getting up before dawn, serving meals to other residents, working hard enough to avoid attention or criticism. "You've got to wake up in the morning and go to work. That was totally new."

Rocha went along, thinking he was beating his time, until one day, someone came up to him and told him he was doing well. And he realized something had changed.

Today, Rocha talks and moves fast, a holdover from the time he did it to survive. But now, there's a depth and thoughtfulness that comes from having slowed down a bit. "At some point when you're in prison," he says, "you stop having dreams like you did when you were a child that you can be a fireman. You see no way of getting out of the situation you're in. Nothing becomes an incentive or a deterrent. If they tell you three strikes, you're out — who cares?"

"Here, you stay at first because you want better clothes. At some point, the dreams come back, and you realize that you're changing."

R.W.