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Working to Kick Criminal Habits



JONATHAN ALCCORN For the Times

Residents of the Los Angeles Delancey Street Foundation work for the program's own moving company.

The Delancey Street Foundation opened its Los Angeles branch, its fifth nationwide, two years ago by transforming the former Midtown Hilton Hotel on Vermont Avenue into a rehabilitation center with 210 rooms, two restaurants, a 500-seat banquet hall, swimming pool, health club and lush gardens. This comparative luxury is earned by the labor of residents, as the foundation uses no taxpayer money to fund its nonprofit residential treatment program for 115 ex-cons, drug addicts and prostitutes in Los Angeles, 1,000 nationwide. Participants get room, board and clothing in exchange for work at Delancey Street business

training schools, which include a moving company, a catering operation and an advertising specialties company.

The only professional staff person is psychologist and criminologist Mimi Silbert, who founded Delancey Street in San Francisco 23 years ago. All other jobs, from housekeeper to facility manager, are held by Delancey Street residents who work their way up the ladder in a highly structured setting.

Dr. Karl Menninger, founder of the Menninger Clinic, the internationally renowned center for psychiatric training treatment and research, called Delancey Street "the best and most successful rehabilitation program I have studied in the world."

Resident Profile

- More than 85% have used heroin for more than 10 years.
- Nearly all residents begin the program illiterate.
- About three-fourths are male.



1 Move In

About 75% of participants come straight

from courts or prison, referred by judges who allow them to serve their sentences at Delancey Street or by word of mouth from other prisoners who know about the program. About 25% come through referrals from former participants and those who know participants.

2 Follow the Rules

- Stay with the program at least two years. The average stay is four years.
- Avoid all drugs and alcohol. Their possession is automatic grounds for



Route to Rehabilitation

dismissal, as are any threats of violence. (In 23 years, there has never been an arrest or violent incident at the foundation's facilities.)

■ Earn high school equivalency diploma. Classes are taught on site by other residents.

■ Learn at least three job skills: one each involving physical labor, clerical or computer work and social interaction.

3 Learn Daily Discipline

- Work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., six days a week.
- Learn how to dress, eat and speak in social settings by attending cultural



events such as opera and symphony performances and eating with other residents. Suits and dresses are required at dinner.

■ Accept feedback from other residents about conduct, during group discussions, called "games," held several evenings a week.

4 Move On

- After getting a job on the outside, participants continue to live at the facility during a two- to three-month transition period. After that, they are encouraged to volunteer with the program.
- An estimated 80% of those who have entered Delancey Street since 1972 have "graduated" from the program.



ONE PARTICIPANT'S STORY

Rennay Blanks, 39, at right, remembers that he started hitting people with baseball bats when he was 7 or 8 years old. At 17, he was convicted of armed robbery. By the time he was 37, he had already served time in seven prisons.

But at another sentencing hearing two years ago, Blanks says a judge who believed in people's capacity to change gave him the option of serving out his five-year prison term at Delancey Street. Blanks jumped at the opportunity. "I knew that if I didn't, I'd be in jail for the rest of my life or dead," he says.

Before Delancey Street, Blanks had held only one job in his life, for just two months. After two years in the program, Blanks has held several jobs that have given him more than the three skills he's required to learn: He's managed the facility's shipping and receiving warehouse, supervised new residents, worked as a caterer and is learning to drive a tractor-trailer. After he leaves Delancey Street Blanks says he'd like to drive a truck or work as a supervisor for a moving company.



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