

Ushering in a hopeful new year at Delancey Street

by Linda Kay

She was 7 years old when I met her. The same age my daughter is now.

She was gap-toothed and smiling, lovable and cute, a raven-haired little angel. She was my girlfriend's precious daughter.

That was 18 years ago. My girlfriend was then a young, single mother. I was a young single, period.

We were both cub reporters at a newspaper, our desks so close we could hear each other's phone conversations. We liked what we overheard. We became friends.

We are friends still.

The years in between have been every parent's nightmare for my girlfriend.

Her marvelous child took a wrong turn in adolescence. She experimented with drugs and never stopped experimenting. She dropped out of high school, started stealing to support a habit and finally, after years of lies and deception, landed in jail.

My friend's lofty dreams for her daughter evaporated. Even the modest dreams vanished. With each passing year, hope for her daughter's future dimmed. As her daughter got older, but no wiser and no better, my friend wondered if her child would die of an overdose.

Three years ago, when I visited my friend for the holidays, her daughter was living with an aunt who'd provided shelter even though the girl had stolen money from her.

My friend went to deliver a present and to ask her daughter to join us for Christmas dinner. Her daughter flatly refused despite her mother's plea. Mother returned home to Christmas dinner without her beloved daughter, eyes puffy from crying during the drive back in the car.

This holiday season, the tears flowed again, but they were not bitter ones. They flowed over a holiday dinner I've chosen to call a five-tissue meal.

It took place at the Delancey Street restaurant in San Francisco.

Delancey Street is not a conventional drug treatment program à la Betty Ford. A majority of the residents at Delancey Street have been in jail, not in the rarified world of politics, sports or the movies. Delancey Street is a place of last resort.

It is a wonderful place of last resort, but before residents can experience the wonder, they must want it very badly. You don't pay to come to Delancey Street. You apply, and if you can convince the administrators, all former residents themselves, that you are sincere about cleaning up or getting sober, they let you in.

When you enter, you step into another realm. You take nothing with you, not even the clothes on your back. You are given something to wear and housed dormitory style with other newcomers. You are put to work immediately. Work is the cornerstone of Delancey Street.

Residents are asked to stay at Delancey Street for two years, though no one is forced to stick around. To "graduate" from the program, one must find a job on the outside while still residing at Delancey Street and hold on to it for six months, donating half the money earned to the organization and putting the rest in the bank. The savings ensure financial security when a resident ultimately leaves.

According to the rules at Delancey Street, no resident can go home to visit his or her family in the first 18 months. As well, family members can visit only when invited by the administration. Invitations are rare. Visits last anywhere from a few moments to a few hours.

My girlfriend was granted a few moments over the holidays. I was with her. Our brief meeting was set up in the Delancey Street restaurant, where we'd made reservations to dine at 8.

Moments after we'd been ushered to our table, a radiant raven-haired woman walked toward us. She smiled at her mother, hugged her tight, told her she loved her and wished her a Merry Christmas. A hug for me, a very short chat, and she was gone.

Tears rained down at our table. A waiter came by to take our order, saw our red-rimmed eyes, heard our sniffles and understood. "First time you've seen her since she's been here?" he asked me. I nodded mutely. "She's doing really well," he said.

She is, indeed. And so is my friend. Together, we ushered in the bright promise of a new year.

Delancey Street operates a moving company, an auto-repair shop and a fabulous restaurant that might be the greatest culinary find in San Francisco.

Renowned chefs like Wolfgang Puck have trained the residents who labor behind the stove at Delancey Street. The menu is thoroughly Californian, with new takes on fruits, vegetables, grains, fish and poultry, but also replete with ethnic specialties that represent the diversity of the residents. Some of the recipes come from Mom and Grandma. Everything is delicious and priced very reasonably.

Waiters and waitresses, residents all, are smartly attired in jet-black pants and crisp white shirts. The male residents, who far outnumber the females, look like choirboys; they are scrubbed, bright-eyed and unfailingly polite. But when they lay down the bread basket, you can glimpse a tattoo on a wrist or hand, and there are often needle marks farther up the arm.

Over the holidays, everyone in Delancey Street works 18-hour days. The organization sells Christmas trees and wreaths, a big-time operation that nets hundreds of thousands of dollars and provides a huge piece of the budget. Delancey Street houses, feeds and employs almost 500 people, with no government help.