

Delancey Street To Become Satellite Campus of Golden Gate University

by George Raine
of the EXAMINER STAFF

In the past 25 years, 12,000 people have matriculated in the school of tough love at the Delancey Street Foundation, but it's only the beginning for the revolutionary San Francisco drug and criminal rehabilitation program.

Delancey Street's president and chief executive, Mimi Silbert, will announce that Golden Gate University is chartering Delancey Street as a satellite college campus that could award bachelor's degrees to residents, most of whom now join Delancey Street in lieu of serving lengthy prison sentences.

The college affiliation, with a course of study to be worked out by the university, is one of several programs being planned to expand the foundation's efforts to rebuild lives. They include a residential academy for youths 10 to 18 at which environmental arts and sciences, both academic and vocational, will be taught, and the dispatching of Delancey residents and graduates to businesses and other groups that could benefit from the example of an institution that values people.

"If this works for the toughest population, it can work for any population," Silbert said.

But getting a degree will not be easy. Candidates for the Class of the Millennium must be free of drugs, alcohol and crime and violence for four



Mimi Silbert, president of Delancey Street Foundation, is shown with some foundation residents.

years, have received their high school equivalencies, studied liberal arts and been trained and certified by Delancey's accredited vocational academy in three marketable skills.

The degree will be called the bachelor of arts in building community, and the same theme repeats itself in Silbert's other ambitious expansion plans.

She has formed, for the Delancey anniversary, an advisory board called CIRCLE, an acronym for Coalition to Implement Revitalized Communities, Lives and Environments. Its diverse membership includes former Secretary

of State George Schultz, Nobel laureate Elie Weisel, Bank of America Chief Executive Richard Rosenberg, Gap President and Chief Executive Millard Drexler and Howard Lester, the chairman and chief executive officer of Williams-Sonoma Inc. Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer have joined, and so have Reps. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, Anna Eshoo, D-Atherton, and George Miller, D-Martinez.

Silbert, said The Gap's Drexler, "has put together the best of people, capitalism and entrepreneurial ideas and teaches her people how to be part of the

community. And she does this with no government funding.”

Silbert’s planning is motivated by two sources: “One was government’s inability to have a broad and inclusive vision, and equal to that was the Delancey Street basic principle that you can’t blame someone else’s inability for something that you believe should be done.

Silbert’s approach to rehabilitation is bipartisan: It appeals to liberals in its commitment to giving people a chance, but she joins conservatives in refusing to use social problems as excuses for individual behavior.

“You have to get an individual to take responsibility for his or her life,” Silbert said. “It’s not an easy thing to do, not now, nor will it be in the next 25 years.”

25 years of tough love at Delancey

To appreciate 25 years of rehabilitation at the Delancey Street Foundation, follow the trail of Shirley LaMarr -- from the house she was burglarizing in broad daylight, in a boozy, dopey stupor, to the age of enlightenment.

There are 12,000 stories like it, about addicts and criminals who have transformed their lives.

It was 1989. LaMarr was a 40-year-old drug addict -- the mother of four kids she hauled from motel to motel as prostitute-in-residence. It was her umpteenth visit to Solano County Jail.

The next stop would have been prison

for a conviction of first-degree burglary. But, in a deal with police and prosecutors, she chose Delancey Street instead. She figured she’d be there long enough to get a rest -- six months maximum.

She stayed five years, which she called the most productive of her life. She emerged as a missionary for her mentor, Mimi Silbert, whose tough-love philosophy as president of Delancey Street is to take responsibility for your life, misdeeds and all, and build anew.

A variation on the theme is engraved in the logo for the satellite campus of Golden Gate University, accredited at Delancey Street last week. It says “Vertere Vertute,” meaning “to transform through courage.”

LaMarr now manages the 189-room Ridge Hotel, a “sober residency” in Oakland that provides beds for addicts and the underclass, and teaches the Delancey philosophy to women inmates in Redwood City.

Although she dropped out of school after the eighth grade, LaMarr will be returning to Delancey to take classes as part of the Millennium.

The regime is a long way from the streets of Oakland and Vallejo, where LaMarr was introduced to drugs at 14 and became pregnant with her first child at 15.

It’s a very great distance from her rap sheet, which includes attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon and countless arrests for prostitution.

For her, the transformation at Delancey Street came in very small pieces.

“I realized after two weeks that I got out of the same bed each morning, and I

went downstairs and ate at the same table and these people were saying ‘Good morning’ to me,” said LaMarr. “That was not enough to turn my life around, but it was the first thing I noticed, so that gives you an idea of what my life was like.”

Over time, other pieces gave shape to the picture puzzle of her new life. Again, they were simple, small things -- “like telling the truth, and admitting you messed up, and asking what do I do to fix that.”

“I never want to forget the nightmare I lived through, because it took a toll on me and my kids, but thank God for Delancey Street, because I don’t have to live that nightmare anymore,” said LaMarr, who met her current husband, truck driver Fleunoy Hampton, at Delancey Street. They now live in Oakland.

“The Delancey Street philosophy is basic,” LaMarr said. “There is nothing mystical. It’s being responsible, it’s learning integrity, to have character, not compromising. It’s treating people how you want to be treated, and it’s discipline. Good, strong, hard discipline. It ain’t soft-stroked. It’s tough, hard love.”

Silbert has always considered Delancey Street a college campus. “Harvard and Yale take the top 2, 3 percent, we take the bottom 2, 3 percent,” she said. But the results are similar -- graduates with more maturity and purpose than when they entered.