

Silbert thrilled by new grant

Delancey Street leader has big plans for S.F.'s juvenile justice system

By Leslie Goldberg
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

As she crunched on cookies at the Delancey Street restaurant, Mimi Silbert gloated just a bit over winning a \$5.5 million grant from the state to reform San Francisco's juvenile justice system.

"Now, we can finally make San Francisco a national model," she beamed.

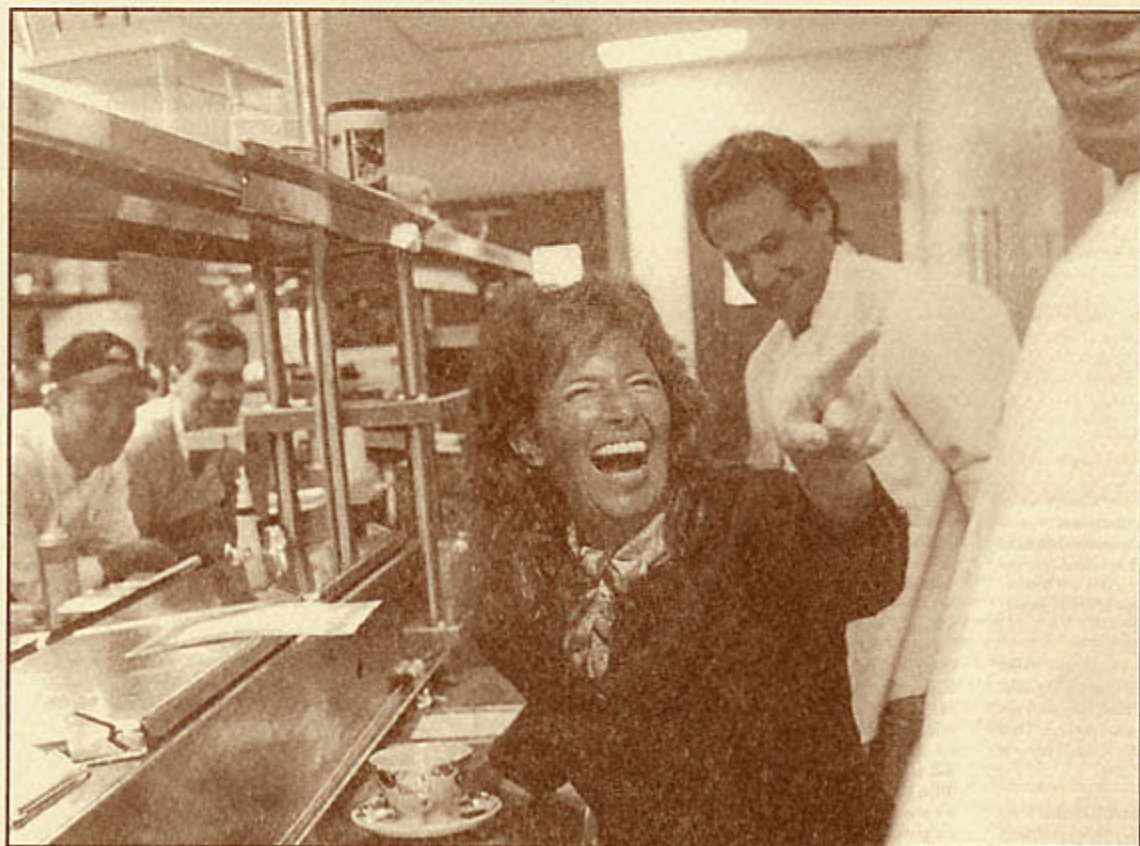
Silbert's Delancey Street Foundation is already nationally acclaimed for its success at reforming hardened adult criminals by administering a dose of confrontational group therapy, occupational training, "life-skills training" and tough love — all within a residential setting.

Over the years, the Delancey Street Foundation has tried to build on the strength of its adult participants, to turn them into "law-abiding, happy, exciting citizens," Silbert said.

Now she intends to do the same for San Francisco's "at risk" and delinquent youngsters.

"When a kid is acting up in school, they start to test him for all his problems — learning disabilities, psychological problems," she said.

Silbert said she wants to change all that and instead give San Francisco youngsters starting to get in trouble at school an "early resilience and strength determination." Although the test hasn't yet been written, Silbert said that San Francisco schools Superintendent Bill Rojas is "totally supportive."



Mimi Silbert, president of the Delancey Street Foundation, plans to use a team approach among S.F. agencies to help reform troubled youngsters.

The test, focusing on a troubled youngster's strengths, would enable school officials and others to help channel the youngster in a more positive direction, she said.

For youngsters who get arrested, Silbert intends to set up a 24-hour "community assessment center" in the Tenderloin District's YMCA, staffed by workers from the Juvenile Probation Department, Police Department, Department of Public Health and community-based organizations.

"We intend to use a team approach," Silbert said. "Traditionally, in San Francisco, all these groups haven't been able to work together."

Representatives from these groups will decide what to do with a youngster — whether to send him home or to juvenile hall. The youth might receive crisis counseling on the spot or get a referral to another agency. The center may also offer detoxification for those addicted to alcohol or drugs, she said, adding that medical staff

would be on site.

San Francisco's juvenile justice system has been the focus of controversy in recent years. The Youth Guidance Center, which usually houses about 120 people — most awaiting trial or sentencing — was successfully sued by the Youth Law Center in 1990 over conditions there.

Silbert said she expects to spend about \$500,000 a year on the center. And while it will employ professionals, the Delancey Street president said she hopes community people will volunteer.

For \$750,000 a year, Silbert plans to set up a "Life Learning Center" for 100 children, also at the Y. "It will offer the highest quality of education — both vocational and educational. It will give youngsters the things that used to be given by the family and churches. Youngsters will get very practical skills, like how to dress, how to eat, how to set a table, how to speak to someone who is different from you."

The Delancey Street plan for juveniles also calls for the creation of a "safe haven," geared for kids in trouble in Bayview-Hunters Point.

If the program goes well, Silbert said the Mission might also get a safe haven center. But for now, she hopes to create a "safe corridor" through the Mission so that youngsters can move freely despite gang territories.

She said she's going to call on church members, parents and business people to stand on Mission Street during peak crime hours.

Meanwhile, she acknowledged that problems remain in San Francisco's Youth Guidance Center and Log Cabin Ranch.

"That's the second layer we're going to need to address," she said. "This is the first layer. Up until now, juvenile hall and the streets were all there were for kids in trouble. We're creating something in between for kids — the community working hand in hand with city agencies."