

# San Jose Mercury News

## After 26 years, Delancey Street still offers second chances.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

**SAN FRANCISCO** – Gerald Miller had just been convicted of robbery. Again.

And this time, the repeat felon and heroin addict would be going to prison for a long time.

Then his probation officer made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Spend the next 12 years in state prison – or three years at the Delancey Street Foundation, a private organization that for 26 years has helped turn around the lives of ex-cons, drug addicts and the homeless. Miller didn't hesitate.

"I said I wanted to change my life and that I wanted to do something different. I told them exactly what they wanted to hear. I just didn't want to go back to prison. Mine was a mathematical choice, pure and simple," Miller recalls.

"We don't care whether you mean it or not," says Mimi Silbert, Delancey's president and founder. "We believe that while you're trying to manipulate us, we'll eventually out-manipulate you."

Miller, who had spent 13 of his last 15 years locked up, never intended to be a model citizen. But because of his decision six years ago, that's exactly what happened. He's close to earning a bachelor's degree. When he's not studying, he visits California jails and prisons, interviewing potential new residents.

Miller is one of Delancey Street's success stories. And there are many others who, despite having to overcome illiteracy and a lack of job skills, go on to a future that doesn't include a jail cell.

"I jokingly compare us to Harvard, except that we have the bottom 2 percent of the population," Silbert says.

Yet the formula is a success. After they leave, a much smaller percentage of Delancey Street graduates get in trouble again when compared with the average ex-con. Silbert boasts that Delancey Street is self-sufficient and accepts no taxpayer money. Except for her position, there is no full-time staff. Helping her are longtime members who supervise new residents.

The foundation operates on money earned from five of its 20 training areas, including a moving company, a restaurant, a printing firm and Christmas tree sales. The finishing touches are being completed on a combination art gallery, book store and café.

Not just a job-training program and certainly not a prison, Delancey Street is different because it also teaches residents responsibility and social survival skills. Among the outside activities are trips to the symphony, ballet and baseball games.

Twice a day, residents study a vocabulary word and concept of the day. They learn the basics of money management, consumer awareness, how to dress and even group speaking.

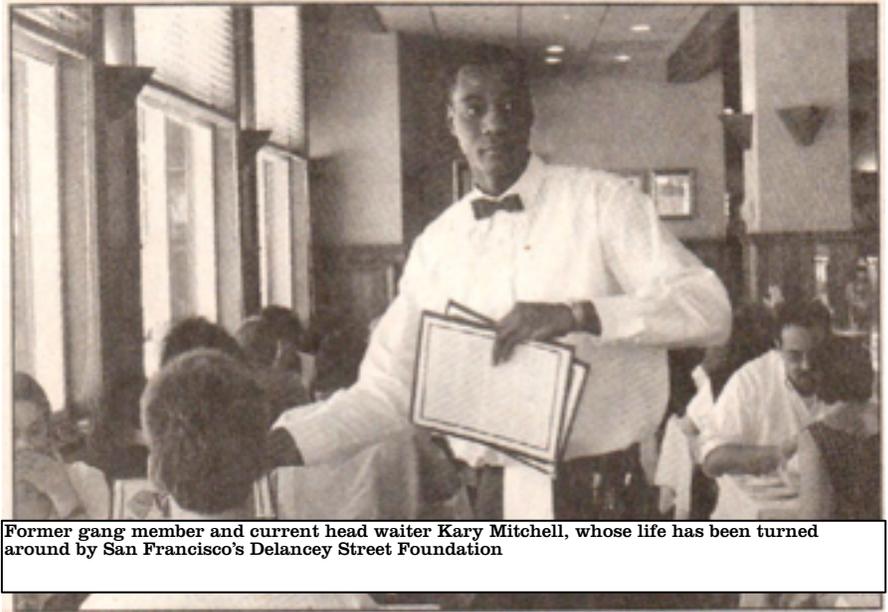
Delancey Street's headquarters fill a 370,000-square-foot, four-story complex along the city's Embarcadero. The 500 residents live in 177 lock-free dorm rooms.

It has the look of a modest country club, with a Mediterranean-style courtyard, swimming pool, recreation room and dining hall.

Most residents stay two to four years before moving on, although some stay longer. The restaurant's maitre d' arrived 25 years ago. When they arrive, residents are taught social skills that most people take for granted: how to make a bed, tie a tie, have dinner conversation. Residents who commit or threaten violence or use drugs or alcohol are expelled.

The foundation's name is borrowed from a street on New York's lower East Side, where many turn-of-the-century immigrants ended up after arriving in this country seeking a better life.

Approximately 12,000 men and women have passed through the program. About 90 percent have gone on to lead productive lives, Silbert says.



Former gang member and current head waiter Kary Mitchell, whose life has been turned around by San Francisco's Delancey Street Foundation