



"I love believing in people; it's the best feeling," says Silbert, with former convicts and other residents of her San Francisco rehab center.

Break Out

Mimi Silbert's Delancey Street center helps ex-cons transform themselves into law-abiding, productive citizens

Inside a lavish \$14 million, 325,000-square-foot complex on San Francisco Bay, it's time for the regular monthly meeting of top executives at one of the city's most thriving enterprises. From a commanding leather armchair in the plush conference room, Mimi Silbert runs rapid-fire through goals for the

next several months: opening a bookstore-cafe, expanding the moving business, adjusting the waterfront restaurant's menu. The 20 or so department heads, sleek in Italian-made jackets and tasseled loafers, nod in agreement and confidently offer suggestions.

It looks like any business meeting,

but the Delancey Street Foundation is no ordinary business. "The average number of felonies committed by people in this room is 18," Silbert, 56, quietly tells a reporter. She gestures at her grandmotherly secretary: "Sandy did 12 years in prison [for forgery and narcotics possession]." She waves to Keith Ottolini, head of the moving company. "He was in San Quentin. A lot."

In its 27 years, Delancey Street, a unique rehabilitation center run solely by its residents, has helped turn more than 12,000 former convicts, drug abusers and homeless men and women into upstanding working people. Its 1,000 current residents (500 in San Francisco, the rest in four branches across the country) support themselves by operating a dozen busi-



Chefs at Delancey Street's gourmet restaurant "hadn't even eaten this stuff before," says Silbert (right).



Silbert shows "there's a more sane way of approaching criminality," says son David.

nesses, including a gourmet restaurant, print shops and a division that markets items emblazoned with college logos. Last year the ventures grossed \$15 million, which financed the organization along with \$9 million in private donations.

Silbert, a tiny, energetic psychologist and criminologist who lives in a one-bedroom apartment in the complex, founded Delancey Street in 1971 with ex-con John Maher. Its

success—90 percent of those who have completed the program now lead law-abiding lives, says Silbert—has drawn praise from Presidents Carter, Reagan and Clinton. The late psychiatrist Karl Menninger termed it "the most successful rehabilitation program I have studied in the world."

About 70 percent of the residents enter the center as an alternative to prison or a condition of parole or probation; others arrive off the street. Admission is selective: "We take only the worst," says Silbert, who does bar sex offenders and people needing psychiatric care.

Once in, those without high school diplomas must earn GEDs in classes taught by Delancey Street veterans. All learn three job skills: one manual, one clerical and one dealing with the public. Residents are placed in outside jobs when they graduate, after an average of four years. "I have always compared Delancey Street with Harvard," says Silbert.

Residents must also dress up for dinner, often in clothes donated by retailers such as Brooks Brothers and The Gap, and attend opera and symphony performances. "We're helping people become middle class in their values and attitudes," Silbert says. Resident Gerald Miller, 41, who served 15 years for armed robbery, concurs. "I used to be so far re-

moved from everything that was decent," he says. "Delancey Street gives you a chance to get connected."

The center's principles grew out of Silbert's own roots. The daughter of a pharmacist and a homemaker in Brookline, Mass., she named the center after Delancey Street in New York City, where many Jewish immigrants, including her parents, first settled.

In 1971, Silbert was married to lawyer Ken Silbert, raising twin sons and running a criminal psychology clinic at the University of California at Berkeley, where she had earned two Ph.Ds.

One day she was approached by Maher, a recovering alcoholic and heroin addict who had served prison time for what she says was a series of petty crimes. He proposed they set up a self-supporting rehab center for ex-cons—an idea Silbert had also been pondering.

They launched Delancey Street soon afterwards. "It was heaven," says Silbert, who was divorced from Ken and became romantically involved with Maher. "We got the opportunity to fall in love and also to make the thing we'd dreamed about come true." Maher, Silbert and her sons David and Greg treated the ex-cons as an extended family. "I thought everyone had former pimps and prostitutes picking them up at school," jokes David, 29, now a San Francisco litigator. (Greg attends Yale Law School.)

In 1985, Maher, who had resumed drinking, left Delancey Street. In 1988 he died of a heart attack. Since then, Silbert has expanded the center's operations and in 1990 moved it to its current headquarters, which she designed and Delancey Streeters built. "I absolutely adore my life," she says. "For 27 years, I've seen the lowest 10 percent come through the door. But a few years later, strong, decent human beings walk out."

- Samantha Miller
- Penelope Rowlands in San Francisco