

Delancey Street

Recovering addicts trade drugs for a whole new life

“We’re all pretty much a bunch of heroin addicts and crackheads here,” says Phil Gonzales, walking through the grounds of the Delancey Street Foundation in Alcalde.

Gonzales, 32, has a wry smile, a blunt way with words and a body full of reminders of the decade he spent addicted to heroin — both in and out of prison. Long-sleeved shirts cover up the needle tracks and tattoos on his arms. His back is scarred from the lung he lost during a prison knife fight. His neck bears the mark of a bullet hole.

“Every morning I look at myself and I know I’m not too far from where I came,” he says.

But in some ways, the Alcalde native has traveled further than most people do in a lifetime. These days, as a “community prevention specialist” for a local anti-drug organization, Gonzales carries business cards and a fancy zip-up executive planner to keep track of his many appointments. He also crafts Spanish-style furniture — a skill he learned at Delancey Street — fixes up old cars in his spare time and helps support his two daughters, who live with their mother.

Gonzales was the youngest son of a family of 10 brothers and sisters. His father died when he was 2 years old. His brothers introduced him to drugs, and his friends got him into the criminal life early on. As the smallest of the kids in the neighborhood he fit easily through windows, making him a handy accomplice for burglaries.

His first drugs were prescription

painkillers, and his first stint in jail was at 14 for stealing tennis shoes. He graduated to cocaine and speedballs — a mixture of heroin and cocaine — as well as to bigger crimes. He attended high school in Española strung out, but he was promoted to the next grade year after year. “I don’t know how I graduated, that’s the sad thing,” he says.

In prison, heroin became his drug of choice. “I looked forward to it every day,” he says.

It was as easy to get inside as out. “When you’re in prison, you have nothing to do but figure out how you’re going to get your next fix,” he says.

Though the Department of Corrections claims it has largely rooted out heroin from the state prisons, Gonzales is skeptical.

“Don’t believe anyone who tells you a prison is run by the guards,” Gonzales says. “Prisons are run by the inmates.”

Delancey Street has neither guards nor inmates, but like Gonzales, many residents are former prisoners. Seventy percent are sent by the courts, and the typical resident has been addicted to drugs for a decade.

Gonzales proudly shows off the grounds of Delancey Street — a 17-acre former resort built around Swan Lake. Additions include an auto-repair garage, a wood shop, arts-and-crafts studios where residents make the kinds of New Mexico-style crafts — terrariums and sand paintings — sold at gift shops. The dining room and common areas, with their formal furniture and stained-glass windows, speak clearly to Delancey Street’s philosophy of providing a dignified setting.

The four-star setting is typical of the five Delancey Street centers around the country. The others are in San Francisco, Los Angeles,

upstate New York and Greensboro, N.C. In San Francisco, the foundation has a new 370,000-square-foot building in the city’s tony Embarcadero area with a restaurant and a view of San Francisco Bay. In Brewster, N.Y., the center is built around a Tudor mansion.

For Gonzales, who accepted a judge’s offer of a two-year probation at the center with the idea of hopping a fence and walking home, Delancey Street came as a shock.

“Remember, I was coming straight out of the joint,” he says. “All of sudden I’m in this beautiful place with a lake with ducks on it and cloth napkins on the table and people serving me dinner. It was tripping me out. Nobody had ever treated me like this in my whole life. I kept waiting for someone to say I had to pay money to stay.”

Also, there were no fences and no gun towers keeping him in. He could walk out the door any time and head back to Alcalde and his old life.

Gonzales stayed, not for two years as required by the judge, but for three. He figured he had nothing to lose, and when he thought about it he figured there was nowhere else he really wanted to go.

Delancey Street kept him busy — mopping floors and going to counseling groups and seminars. The day started at 6:30 a.m. and ended at 11 p.m. He was so tired at the end of it, he hardly noticed he was kicking heroin.

“That’s how we work. We’re not a medical detox facility, so we can’t give medication,” says Conrad Laren, a Delancey Street graduate who now interviews prospective residents at the facility in San Francisco. “We give them something to do. We hand them a broom, anything.”

The foundation takes its name from a street on the Lower East Side

of New York where immigrants from the Old World often made their first homes in America. The real Delancey Street became known as a symbol of immigrant self-reliance; of a community where earlier arrivals helped newcomers make it in a new country.

That's the theory Mimi Silbert wanted to apply to the rehabilitation center she founded with \$1,000 from a loan shark and the help of her partner, John Maher, a former addict, who died in 1988.

In 1977, the foundation opened the Alcalde center on a former dude ranch for movie stars that had been abandoned in the 1960s.

About 12,000 people have been through Delancey Street since its founding. The foundation takes in about \$9 million a year from its businesses and raises \$3 million more from contributions. Delancey houses about 1,000 members in the five facilities, with about 100 in Alcalde.

None of the centers has guards, counselors or other paid staff. Instead, newcomers are taught job and life skills by residents who have been there longer.

The foundation does not have a system of tracking graduates. Along with success stories there are failures.

"I'd be lying if I said this place works for everyone," Gonzales says.

A childhood friend was Alfonso Cordova, another Delancey Street graduate who later worked with Gonzales at the Piñon Hills Residential Treatment Center for troubled adolescents in Velarde.

The two men were the same age and appeared to be on the same track, working and sober. But last year, Gonzales says, Cordova went back to using heroin. Gonzales says he confronted Cordova about his drug use but was shrugged off.

In September, Cordova was arrested on charges of fatally shooting Danny Chavez and Anthony Martinez in Chimayó. Soon after his arrest, Cordova hanged himself in his jail cell.



Phil Gonzales, a former heroin addict, talks to students at Alcalde Elementary School about the dangers of drugs.

"I carry all that arround with me," Gonzales says. "I know I could start using again and something could happen to me."

Gonzales, who runs after-school programs at Española grade schools for Hands Across Cultures, a local anti-drug organization, talks to kids about his pre-Delancey Street days.

He recently showed up at Española Middle School. The school, surrounded by some of the poorest housing in the city, is a low-slung building crouched around a dusty courtyard. It looks from the outside like a juvenile-detention center. Its mission is to educate 800 seventh- and eighth-graders.

There are two girls and four boys confined to in-school suspension, housed in a locked room furnished with torn-up carpets and scattered desks. Two uniformed security guards keep watch.

Gonzales, dressed in a long-sleeved shirt to cover up his tattoos and scars, tells the kids of his childhood, of stealing, breaking windows and "getting the whole school stoned," of being locked up in prison at 17 for armed robbery.

"I thought prison was going to be fun," he tells the kids. "But the first night I was there I cried."

The boys fidget and squirm, slamming their desks around. The girls keep their heads down, doodling intently in their notebooks. The guard yells at the boys to sit still.

Later, after a fire drill breaks up the lecture, a counselor mentions to Gonzales a plan to take the kids to the state penitentiary on a field trip to persuade them not to use drugs. A boy, overhearing her, says "We're going to prison? That'd be bad!"

Gonzales remains encouraged, despite the reaction. He thinks he has the best chance of reaching kids.

"You go in there, as a social worker or the police, they're just going to hate you," he says. "You have to be believable. They have to know you've been there."