

**REGION**

Bloomington, Indiana

**Delancey Street program shines as bootstraps example**

A column-writing colleague suggested that I might include the Delancey Street Foundation among the sights to see during the few days I'd earmarked to explore San Francisco last week.

She even called it "inspirational," which raises a red flag in the mind of any healthy skeptic on vacation in one of America's most cosmopolitan cities. I'm just guessing here, but I don't believe that most people go to San Francisco looking to locate mankind's nobler aspirations.

But after taking the cook's tour with catering manager Charles Williams, I walked out of the remarkable Delancey Street compound on the South Bay's gentrified Embarcadero feeling, for the first time in many, many years, that genuine rehabilitation is possible, from prison, crime and drug and alcohol abuse.

Delancey Street has been doing it for nearly three decades now; spectacularly so since the organization built its handsome, \$70 million complex a decade ago — a full, square block of stylish townhouses and businesses, including a restaurant that numerous food writers have placed on the city's "Best Bets" lists.

"People don't eat in our restaurant or utilize our services because they feel sorry for us," explains Williams, a 40-year-old African-American who speaks well and looks comfortable in a blue pin-stripe shirt and conservative tie. "It's not because people want to help the addicts and the convicts."

Delancey Street businesses thrive because their workers are clear-eyed and motivated and the residency program keeps costs down. Delancey Street residents receive room and board and other essential services but no pay.

At least part of Delancey Street's success can be attributed to people such as Williams, whose Ivy League education and early work success came tumbling down as a result of alcohol, cocaine and finally, heroin abuse.



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"People who come here, what happens is when we fall we fall all the way down," Williams says. "It's pretty much a common thread."

Williams spent a couple of years in the Bay Area's notorious San Quentin Prison. Upon release, his mother told him he could not come home. She would not allow him to inflict more pain on her or her family.

And so Williams decided he truly wanted to turn his life around and opted for the Delancey Street program. It requires a minimum two-year commitment. You start out living in a dorm-like room with about eight roommates and you work on a maintenance crew until you prove you can handle more responsibility.

There are three rules: no violence, no threats of violence or intimidation and no alcohol or drugs. There are no drug tests. "We've all been there, so we all know the signs," Williams says knowingly.

As time goes by, various jobs become available, all within the Delancey Street umbrella. There is a moving company, a trucking company and an executive limousine service that is heavily utilized by the trendy San Francisco-based clothing company, The Gap.

There is a Christmas business unit that contracts with Oregon growers and trucks Christmas trees back to the Bay Area, where they're sold in lots or used in displays that decorate local landmarks including the Transamerica Building.

There is even, remarkably, a state-of-the-art small theater within the compound that's used to screen the daily film footage shot in the Bay Area on movie projects by such regular patrons as Francis Ford Coppola, Robin Williams and Ron Howard.

Local "dot-com" companies and

financiers such as Charles Schwab use the handsome "Town Hall" room to host shareholder meetings and other functions.

Residents typically see a lot of themselves in new arrivals: an inability to communicate feelings and a thick shell that de-sensitizes the individual from the pain he or she has caused others. "If you can channel the energy it takes to destroy the lives of others, you can come up with a productive citizen," Williams says. "We spend a lot of time looking at who we are and how we got to where we got."

Thus, the peer counseling that comes from the motto, "each one, teach one," resonates in a way that other types of counseling often do not. Whether a five-year resident is educated like Williams or without the benefit of high school attendance, there is a kinship created in the knowledge that every single resident hit bottom before going to Delancey Street.

Williams likes to quote Delancey Street's founder, psychologist Mimi Halper Silbert, when he talks about Delancey people. "She compares us to Harvard," he says, smiling. "They take the top 2 percent and we take the bottom 2 percent. But we're still very much like a college."

About 450 people reside in the Mediterranean-styled townhouses in San Francisco. Another 500-plus reside in Delancey Street's four spin-off locations in Los Angeles, North Carolina, New Mexico and upstate New York.

They all serve the same purpose in creating an environment in which people can change their lives. Roughly 60 percent of Delancey Street enrollees never return to prison. An amazing 80 percent of "graduates" stay clean.

"This place saved my life," Williams says earnestly. "And it's allowed me to know the satisfaction of helping other people save themselves."

"I was so self-absorbed in my life before I became self-destructive," he says. "Here you learn that when A helps B, B isn't the only one to benefit. A gets better, too."