35p

No. 66,924

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 5 2000

www.the-times.co.uk

Life on the outside begins with a haircut and a job

t resembles a luxury apartment complex you might expect to see in London's Docklands or New York. There is a gym, a restaurant and even a small cinema to entertain the 500 residents of the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco. But far from being a dream abode for yuppies, Delancey Street is, in fact, America's most radical attempt to rehabilitate offenders.

The foundation's café is typical of the place. It is as smart as anything you would find in London but all the staff are exoffenders who have on average been in prison four times and used drugs for ten years.

Gerald Miller, 43, is one of them. The former armed robber has been in trouble from an early age. Nine years ago he was arrested in San Francisco and given the choice of a 20-year sentence or going to Delancey Street. He chose the latter, if not for the right reasons: "I told them all these things about how I wanted to change my life, how I wanted to be a decent human. None of it was true - I just didn't want to go to prison for 20 years," he says.

Miller was accepted but it was far from the easy ride he had expected. Residents have to stay for at least two years most stay for four. Seventy per cent are offered Delancey as an alternative to prison or as a condition of parole or prison. The rest simply walk in off the

street.

The complete ban on alcohol, drugs and threatening behaviour is not surprising. What Miller was not expecting was that from the beginning he would have to have a respectable haircut, dress smartly and even change the way he walked. He smiles wryly as he remembers the experience: "It was really difficult for me to settle in - I'd spent all my time in prison or on street corners. I

An American self-help project succeeds with 90 per cent of offenders.

Bob Howard wonders whether the scheme could work here

vibrated for the first few months until I finally calmed down and settled in."

Delaney Street was founded in 1971 by Mimi Silbert, a criminal psychologist, and John Maher, a former alcoholic, heroin addict and petty criminal. From the beginning, the foundation's ethos was that there should be no employees, no state aid and that the members should help themselves.

The foundation began with Silbert, Maher and two former convicts living in a San Francisco apartment. In just a year the community had grown to 100. Today 500 residents live together in a self-contained community of 177 apartments. The complex was designed and built by the residents and includes a 150-seat cinema, a health club and a 500-seat assembly hall. There is also a print shop, car body shop, upmarket restaurant and bar, as well as the catering service where the residents work.

It's like holding hands when climbing a mountain. You all rise together or you all fall

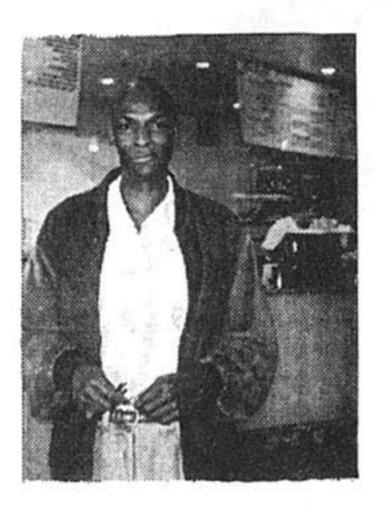
No one is paid and all the money is ploughed back into the community. In return everyone is given free food and lodging and a modest amount of pocket money.

The community's emphasis is on developing both work and interpersonal skills simultaneously. Most residents are functionally illiterate and unskilled. During their time at Delancey, they must undertake one manual, one clerical and one peoplerelated job and earn the equivalent of a high school diploma.

At the same time each new resident is looked after by the last resident who has been accepted to give them a sense of responsibility. They have to dress for dinner and are expected to attend cultural events such as symphony concerts and opera.

Towards the end of their stay they "work out". This means that they still live in Delancey Street but must find work outside and start looking for somewhere to live so that they are not suddenly cast adrift.

Silbert has no doubt as to the value of the community's work: "I adore my life. I've seen the bottom 10 per cent come through the door. But a few years later, decent human beings walk out. It is like holding hands when climbing up a mountain. You either all rise together or you all fall." More than ten thousand people have graduated from Delancey since it began. The range of jobs they have gone on to is impressive everything from truck drivers to lawyers. One has become a deputy sheriff, another a deputy coroner. Delancey Street claims that no resident has ever been arrested on its premises



Gerald Miller: "I'd spent all my life in jail or on street corners"

and 90 per cent of its members go on to live law-abiding lives. OtherAmerican states are enthusiastic, with sister projects operating in New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, and in Los Angeles.

So could it work in the UK? In principle there is no reason why not, although there is a born-again zeal about the place that is infectious but also perhaps a little "un-British". While there are a wide variety of schemes here to rehabilitate offenders, none is on the scale of Delancey Street or claim its level of success. Meanwhile, reconviction rates for England and Wales are still frighteningly high. More than half of all prisoners reoffend within two years of their release, with the rate rising to nine out of ten for 14 to 16-year-olds.

"You don't learn anything in prison," says Miller, who is about to graduate from college. "I've been in prison three or four times and all I learnt was how to be, if not a better criminal, then a worse one. I hope one day Delancey will become a national model and instead of building more prisons we'll build more Delancey Streets."

The author is a reporter for the Radio 5 Live programme Global.