

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Second Chance for Young Thugs

If you take the worst high school losers in the city, the most dramatic nonachievers, kids who can't read and don't give a rat's rear, who are into drugs and guns and assorted mischief, and you ship them to a desolate island in the middle of San Francisco Bay, what do you have?

Alcatraz High, right?

Close. Geographically close, anyway. Life Learning Academy, a.k.a. Treasure Island High — is just a short row from Alcatraz, and you have to be damaged goods to wind up at either place.

But Alcatraz was despair; Life Learning is hope.

To become a student here, you have to get very, very low. Cory remembers his low point: his freshman year at a San Francisco high school, when he was busted on campus with a loaded .32 pistol and a bag of weed big enough to qualify him as a dealer.

"I got caught up with a rival crew, and I heard they were aiming for me," Cory says, explaining the gun.

By the way, in this context, "rival crew" does not refer to another school's rowing team.

Cory holds the moment in his mental photo album. He is leaning over the principal's desk as the cops cuff his wrists behind him, and he looks up to see the principal smiling because he has one less armed thug to deal with.

A year later, with Cory on probation for misdeeds including burglary and sporting a GPA of 0.85 (what, a D-minus in gym?), a light flickered.

He heard about LLA and begged his way in. That was last year. Now he's got at least six colleges offering him scholarships.

The typical student arriving here can't read, has been abused, does drugs, commits crimes,



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gang-bangs, has a disaster of a home life, is very pissed off and very alone.

He or she must convince the administration that he or she truly wants to try a different path.

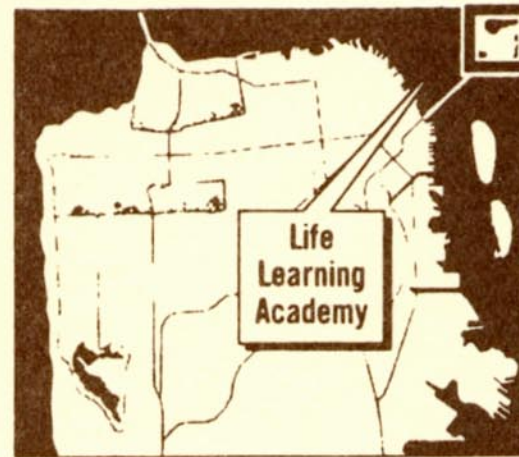
After two years here, the typical student has a legit strong GPA, can fight fires, repair bikes, speak Japanese or Spanish, run a small business, build buildings, prepare meals from scratch (step one: grow the food), use a computer, express thoughts, care about others, and see beyond the street corner.

Life Learning Academy was started two years ago by Mimi Silbert, who runs Delancey Street Foundation. Willie Brown asked her to overhaul the city's juvenile justice system, and as one aspect of the project, Silbert wanted to open a high school based on the Delancey Street philosophy. The mayor gave her a small, rundown building on Treasure Island.

The students took up hammers and saws and have expanded the building from 8,000 square feet to 24,000, and turned it into the hippest, cleanest school in the city.

"Someone asked me the other day if the kids mess up the school," says Silbert, and she laughs. "They built this school. If I put my hands on the wall, they get upset with me."

### FORTY-NINE STORIES: #10



The place is as clean as a hospital and 100 percent free of drugs and violence. In two years, there has not been a fight.

"If someone brought drugs to campus, I'd know about it within 15 minutes," says Principal Teri Lynch Delane, a Delancey Street success story herself. "One of the kids would be in my office saying, 'We've got to have a talk with this student.'"

Based on the histories of the kids, there should be armed security cops roaming the halls. But, says Silbert, "If you give kids responsibility and a reason to do the right thing, you really don't have to kick much ass. Everybody wants to be somebody."

LLA is a charter school, financed by private and public funds, with about 70 students. The faculty is mostly young teachers, all with doctorates or master's degrees, who had their pick of educational jobs.

There is a lot of idealism floating around this school, and it's infectious. The enthusiasm is almost frightening. If all of Silbert's headmaster pay is in student hugs, she is richer than Bill Gates.

When Life Learning was given a spot on the Island, strong objections

were raised by neighbors. This is a nice, quiet place, why bring in a bunch of thugs?

At one point, the students made gift jars of homemade bean soup mix and distributed them to their neighbors on the island. Complaints have long since ceased.

Students are picked up by van at 8 a.m. and brought home at 10 p.m. If a student misses a day, somebody is on the phone or knocking at his or her door to find out what's wrong.

Greg, a typical LLA student, was big into gangs and drugs and robbery, made only token appearances at school, was on five-year probation.

"I just told myself I was going to do the right thing," he says. "I told my parole officer I wanted to come here."

The gang? "I just stay away from 'em. They know I ain't going for it now. I have a younger brother and sister, 10 and 9, I don't want them to follow me (into delinquency).

"Now they tell me, 'You be at that school all day, they be fillin' your head up. You hecka smart.'"

Lauren was hecka zilch, a straight-F student who finally dropped out completely and sat around home doing nothing.

She's one of three students who show me around the campus. She's somewhat shy, but as we walk into the brand-new performing arts center, Lauren looks toward one side of the room and says quietly, "I built that wall."

San Francisco is 49 square miles. Each week Scott Ostler picks a square mile at random, goes to that square and finds a story for his Monday column. Comments, suggestions? Call (415) 777-7031 or e-mail ostler@sfgate.com