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**Psychologist Mimi Silbert is honored for her tireless work in helping people turn from lives of crime to lives of productivity and health.**

**BY TED BAROODY  
AND KATHRYN HEWLETT**

**W**hen Shirley LaMarr dropped out of junior high because she was pregnant, she began a life of drugs, crime and street living. She was addicted to heroin, fell into prostitution and was arrested often for theft and drug possession. When she was jailed for the last time, at about age 40, she sent a letter to the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco in a last-ditch effort for help. Over a period of more than three years in residence at Delancey, she kicked her drug habit, earned a high-school equivalency diploma and learned for the first time how to be a role model for her children. With her training, she became manager of the Ridge Hotel in Oakland, Calif.

A remarkable comeback story, but not an uncommon one for the Delancey Street Foundation, a San Francisco-based self-help, residential-education center for recovering substance abusers and ex-convicts that is based on the principles of accountability and community. In fact, the group's president and co-founder, psychologist Mimi Silbert, PhD, has helped to give more than 18,000 former criminals a second chance in life.

In recognition of her tireless and courageous work, Silbert was recognized at APA's 2001 Annual Convention with the Harry V. McNeill Award for innovation in community health, given to her by APA, the American Psychological Foundation and APA's Div. 27 (Society for Community Research and Action).

The men and women at the APA ceremony were not practitioners, businessmen or scientists who had come to award each other for their high pursuits. Instead, they were Delancey Street residents—previously convicted felons, drug addicts, prostitutes and others who made a decision at the lowest point in their lives to start climbing up from the bottom.

The frequent eruption of thunderous applause from the residents—especially when Silbert commended them for their courage in being "doctors" to themselves and to each other—illustrated not only their warm affection for Silbert, but their enthusiasm for the change in their lives.

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## **Serving society's needs**

Silbert's journey to help people began 30 years ago when she and a charismatic ex-convict named John Maher put their heads together to create a rehabilitation

program that would take lives lost in the streets and move them into the society that needs their talents.

What resulted was a program in which Silbert—the only professional—and 500 residents run an award-winning, swanky restaurant and catering company, an upscale bookstore, a silk-screen company, an auto service center, a coffee shop, a print shop and northern California's largest independent moving company. They also operate seasonal businesses such as hugely successful Christmas tree sales and holiday decorating for large buildings.

In recent years, four other Delancey Street facilities have sprung up: in Los Angeles; San Juan Pueblo, N.M.; Brewster, N.Y.; and Greensboro, N.C.

The population at the San Francisco center ranges in age from 18 to 68, of whom about one-quarter are women, one-third African-American, one-third Hispanic and one-third white. The average resident has been a hard-core drug addict for 10 years and has been in prison four times. Many have been gang members and come from families that have been trapped in poverty for several generations. The courts refer about 70 percent and 30 percent have been homeless before they enter the center.

A fact that shocks most people is that the foundation has refused to seek or accept government funding. It has all been paid for by the work of the residents, who, in 1990, built its complex and paid off the \$10 million loan it required—in four years.

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Despite the violent and criminal backgrounds of the residents, there has never been one arrest in all the years that the center has been in operation.

Although the average resident is functionally illiterate and unskilled when entering, all receive a high-school equivalency certificate and are trained in marketable skills before graduating. During the minimum stay of two years—the average stay is four—residents learn not only academic and vocational skills, but also interpersonal and social survival skills, along with the attitudes, values, sense of responsibility and self-reliance necessary to live in the mainstream of society drug-free, successfully and legitimately.



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### **'Reach back and inspire'**

The motto, "Each one, teach one," is the method by which residents learn. A resident about to graduate—or "get off immigration," as it is called—is expected to "reach back and inspire [the new resident]," explains resident Joseph Crowley.

"You teach what you know," he says.

Another resident, Armando Palacios, says that the games, groups and sessions help to "give insight with problems [residents] don't know how to deal with." Residents discover "what triggers each other emotionally," he adds.

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Longtime resident Gerald Miller, a former prison-hopping drug dealer, user and gang member turned administrative assistant for Silbert, points out the daily irony at Delancey Street: "Here you see gang members who were sworn to kill each other playing ping-pong together."

Silbert is a criminal justice planner and evaluator who has directed the evaluation of more than 100 projects through such agencies as the National Institute of Mental Health, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the John D. Rockefeller Foundation. For 28 years, she has designed curricula and provided training for more than 50 police, sheriff's and probation departments.

As a result of her pioneering work in rehabilitation and substance abuse, Silbert was appointed to the National Institute of Justice by President Jimmy Carter, to the California State Board of Corrections by Governors George Deukmejian and Gray Davis, and to the Blue Ribbon Commission on Inmate Population Management by the California State Senate. <sup>Ψ</sup>

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*For more details about Delancey Street and its operations, contact Stephanie Muller at (415) 512-5148 or write to the foundation at 600 Embarcadero, San Francisco, CA 94107.*