Reprinted From

The Jerusalem Report

Jan.14, 2002

The Prison That Thinks It's a Kibbutz

An innovative program, inspired by Jewish togetherness on New York's Lower East Side, has rehabilitation on the menu

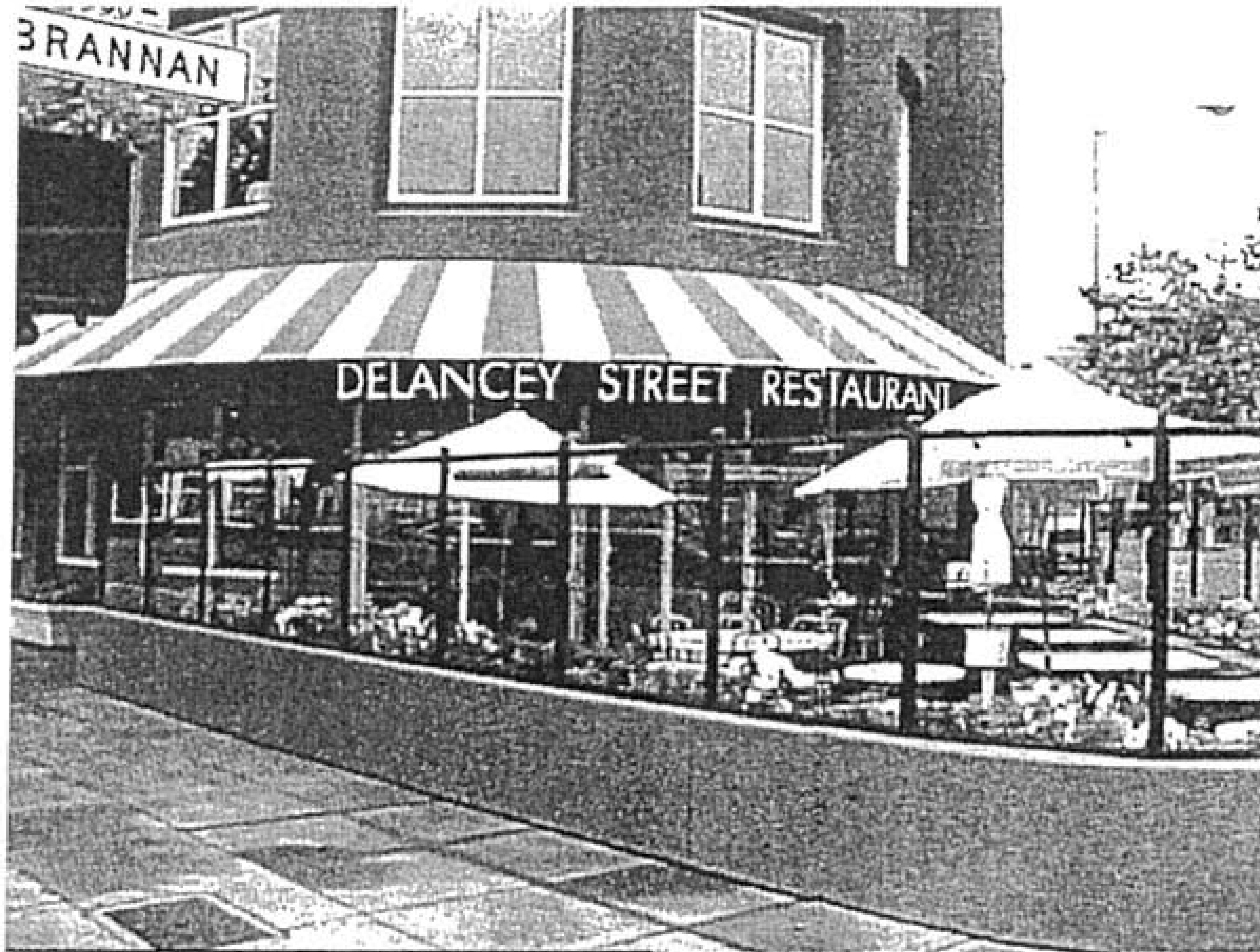
Andrew Friedman San Francisco

DELANCEY STREET RESTaurant is an elegant affair on the Embarcadero, a main drag stretching almost the entire length of the San Francisco waterfront. Formal table settings, waiters in black ties, a doorman and valet parking make for a classy night out, and the mid-range prices for a wide range of menu choices keep it on the top side of affordable. During the baseball season it is hard to get a table before and after Giants games, down the street at Pacific Bell Park.

To the casual observer, Delancey Street is just another restaurant in a city with more eateries per capita than anywhere else in the world. But there is more to Delancey than meets the eye. Every one of the people working there, the elegant waiters, cooks, valets and maintenance staff, has a long prison history, many for violent crimes. Some have done hard time for murder, and most have had to overcome severe drug addictions. What's more, the restaurant and sundry sister enterprises, in a rehabilitation program with over 2,000 residents in five locations throughout the United States, are run on a model of pure socialism, patterned after the classic Israeli kibbutz.

The driving force behind the Delancey Street Foundation, with its four-story flagship center on San Francisco's south side, is Dr. Mimi Silbert, a 59-year-old ex-New Yorker who has lived in the Bay Area since the 1960s. The story starts with her childhood on the Lower East Side. "My father came from Lithuania, my mother from Poland," she says, her New York accent still strong. "Everyone we knew were immigrants, and we all took care of each other. It was a time and a place where everyone looked after you, and you were expected to do the same. The Lower East Side of the 1940s and 50s was really a large extended family." Delancey, which she founded in 1971, grew directly out of that experience. Even the name is a tribute to Silbert's childhood (Delancey Street is a main thoroughfare on the Lower East Side).

Silbert, neatly dressed and smiling, packs a ton of energy into her five-foot frame. She says that while she received no formal Jewish education, her parents instilled in her a deep-rooted old-country flavor. "My first language was Yiddish, and being Jewish permeated every aspect of my life," she says with a smile. "There was no such thing as a holiday without a family gathering. My father would hear of an old



CONFECTION: San Francisco's Delancey Street, an elegant eatery where murderers may wait on tables, muggers greet you at the door, former prostitutes wash dishes and reformed drug addicts park your car. And they all take a share of the profits in a rehab program that claims a 90-percent success rate.

'Guys come in here at the end of their ropes. Just saying "good morning" without wanting to kill someone is a struggle.'

lady who had been mugged and say '*Oy gevalt*, can you imagine the pain of that boy that he should steal from a helpless old lady?' He wasn't insensitive to the victim, he just understood the mugger's pain was no less significant than the old lady's."

Silbert's parents were also staunch Labor Zionists who were fiercely proud of the Jewish State, and especially of the kibbutzim. The combination of Jewish compassion and Zionist pride led her to model Delancey Street after the kibbutz. She has visited Israel many times, and has even brought along Delancey Street residents, always with a mandatory tour of a real kibbutz.

After coming to San Francisco in the 1960s, Silbert earned doctorates in criminology and criminal psychology. She worked in the California prison system for nearly a decade. Seeing the system firsthand made her realize just how flawed it was. "The real horror of prison," she says, " is that it becomes comfortable. Repeat offenders always have friends to come home to, and they quickly learn to live by the rules of prison society — hatred, bigotry, gangs. The very rules that prevent them from living on the outside."

For Silbert, Delancey is not just a project, but her whole life. She has lived at the center from the beginning, raised her two children there. Her husband John died nine years ago. She gets her clothes, spending money, and food from the same place everyone else does, and her vote is equal to other residents. "If my word carries any extra weight," she says, "it is only by virtue of being the longest standing member."

As at a kibbutz, all communal decisions are made by committee, from minor choices such as whether to invite a particular speaker, to major ones, like whether to buy a new foundation car. Candidates must apply for membership and be interviewed by a committee of veteran residents.

Work is a major part of life at Delancey Street. "Working together teaches residents how to pool resources, how to look out for others, how it feels to be a contributing member of a community," says Silbert. Newcomers are placed on the facility maintenance crew immediately, and remain there a minimum of four months. From there, they move on to white- and blue-collar tasks, preparing for their eventual transition out of Delancey. The emphasis is practical, and it is no coincidence that Delancey graduates have largely avoided the recession that has gripped the rest of Northern California following the hi-tech collapse. Delancey Street alumni work as fire-fighters, construction managers, doctors, and teachers.

THE MORNING RAIN GLIMMERS off the Oakland Bay Bridge, stretching over San Francisco Bay just outside the window of the hostel's main cafe-

teria. About two-thirds of Delancey's 500 residents are finishing their breakfast of eggs, French toast and oatmeal, and the clean-up crew is trying to get a jump on finishing the morning rush. Most people are chatting, drinking coffee, or reading the paper, waiting for the 15-20 minute morning meeting to start. A resident comedian known only as Diesel gets up to explain his nickname: "I used to work in a shoe store," says the middle-aged white guy in a Southern drawl. "One day a woman came in and asked for a pair of shoes. I grabbed a pair off the shelf and told her 'Deez'l fit.' Since then, I been known as Diesel."

The meeting, led each day by a different resident, starts with a word of the day ("microcosm"), including a simple definition and use in a sentence. The program also features a song ("Stand by Me," featuring Diesel again, this time playing the spoons), and a thought for the day: "When you're up to your butt in alligators, it's hard to remember that the goal is to drain the swamp." Residents are required to attend, "just to start the day out right." But according to one woman, the rule is unnecessary. "People would come anyway," she says.

To the outsider, two things are immediately striking here: people are not just polite, but energetically polite, and there is a complete lack of foul language. Gerald, a tall, well-built African American, who prefers not to give his last name, came to Delancey six years ago from the maximum-security prison at San Quentin. He explains: "Most people are one step away from death when they get here. Every person here feels they have been given a new lease on life. Of course we are energetic."

When they first arrive, residents have little free time. They are restricted to a tight 6:30 a.m.-11:30 p.m. schedule, roll call, and don't leave the premises. Each is assigned to a "minyan," a resident-run supervision group of eight to 10 people, named for the quorum necessary for Jewish prayers. They will remain there a minimum of six months. The minyan leader, a veteran resident who has been at Delancey at least two years, acts as mentor, teacher, and confidant, though it takes many new residents a year or longer to come around to talking. He or she is also responsible for the progress of the group. As they advance through the system, residents are granted more privileges and more freedom and spending money. Arts and culture organizations from around the Bay Area donate tickets, and eventually, residents are allowed to check out foundation cars for a night on the town.

Brian Lewis, a shy 36-year-old who paroled to Delancey from the California State Prison 16 months ago, says the first lesson is how to speak properly. "Prison jive is its own lingo," he says quietly. "Changing the way you speak is the first step to breaking out of that mindset." Although there is no official ban on cursing, he observes that it is hard to curse in an atmosphere where no one else does.

Gerald feels that it is not merely a case of starting "somewhere," but a pointed first lesson. "Guys coming in here are at the end of their ropes," he says. "They are full of anger and hate. Just saying 'good morning' without wanting to kill someone is a struggle at first."

PHOTOS COURTESY DELANCEY STREET FOUNDATION

Reggie Boyer, a 42-year-old African American originally from Baltimore, concurs. "When you first arrive, you feel totally out of the loop. I spent 25 years addicted to drugs, in and out of prison, and when I arrived here I thought I was in a movie. I kept thinking, 'Where are all the druggies?' expecting to eventually discover what was really going on."

Boyer says that he didn't speak to anyone for a full year, but after a while, Delancey Street wore him down. "Eventually I got up the courage to smile when my roommate said 'Good morning,' and then I even wished him a good night! It may have been a small lesson, but it was an accomplishment. If I could do that, maybe I could eventually belong and succeed."

Residents and graduates say these basic lessons are crucial. Christina Barnett, a 36-year-old California native who spent three and a half years at Delancey, says that she had no concept of civil behavior. Beginning at age 12, she never spent more than 90 days out of jail, and rapidly graduated from marijuana to heroin addiction. By 1997, she was facing two consecutive 25-years-to-life sentences for drug-related robberies and violence. "I didn't even care," she says now. "I would have run over my own children to get drugs. I didn't need rehabilitation. I needed to start my life over again." Now, she works as a project manager for a Sacramento (Calif.) construction company, and is saving money to buy a house with her husband Phil, also a Delancey alumnus.

OF ALL DELANCEY'S VENtures, the one residents talk about most is the education program. More than 60 percent of new arrivals are functionally illiterate, most have never worked, and are the products of generations of poverty and violence. As part of the minimum two-year stay, Delancey offers tutoring for residents to complete their high school diplomas, and has been a licensed vocational school since 1989. In addition, the foundation is a recognized campus of nearby San Francisco State and Golden Gate universities. High-school tutoring is done in-house by residents who have completed their diplomas, and university courses are taught by volunteer professors. Over 10,000 high school diplomas, 1,000 vocational certificates, and 28 BA degrees have been awarded.

Like at kibbutz, all maintenance work is done in-house. Residents built every inch of the Foundation's five nationwide facilities, including the 400,000-sq.-foot four-story San Francisco building which boasts a 150-seat, state-of-the-art movie theater, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, dormitory, garage and catering hall.

Apart from the restaurant, the foundation operates a café, a moving company, an auto repair shop, a construction company, and various smaller ventures, and its Christmas tree sales lot is one of the biggest in the city. Income from Delancey Street businesses account for 60 to 70 percent of the foundation's local \$20-million to \$30- million annual budget. The rest comes from businesses that in many cases have turned from unwilling neighbors to active supporters. Silbert recalls that in Delancey's original Pacific Heights location, many neighbors were less than thrilled at the prospect of living next to "all those convicts." "After we refurbished our building, we set out to make friends," she says. "Back then, Pacific Heights was a high-crime area, so our people started patrolling the neighborhood. We went

house to house, volunteering in the community, convincing people just to give us a chance."

Silbert says that Delancey Street Moving Company is a product of this neighborhood volunteering. "We were helping an elderly woman paint her house," she laughs, "and I asked one of our guys to move the piano. I didn't expect him to do it himself, but he had spent years in jail, where there was little to do but lift weights. A second later I heard him say, 'OK, where do you want it, lady?' The next day we canvassed the neighborhood and went into the moving business."

Although the foundation doesn't solicit monetary donations, it doesn't refuse them either, and it does solicit product donations. Such donations have provided the materials for the movie theater, with a surround sound system donated by Dolby Laboratories, and the brass trimming that adorns much of the restaurant.

By the mid-1980s, the foundation had outgrown its Pacific Heights location and moved to its current location on the city's south side. Silbert believes that a straight, no-nonsense approach is the key to Delancey's success. "There are a million programs and halfway houses out there, with health professionals and psychologists galore. And you know what? The vast majority of their graduates return to prison shortly after being released. Here, there are no drug counselors, no therapists, no experts. All we do here is teach people to break the cycle of negative behaviors that has wrecked their lives, and help them relearn the positive behaviors that can help them rebuild."

She founded Delancey Street when she convinced a private school to accept a teenage prostitute, who had dropped out of seventh grade, by promising to paint the school and build a brand new jungle gym. At the time, Silbert was running a counseling service for ex-cons, so she bussed 40 of her worst clients to the school, and started painting. "We looked at each other and said, 'Do you know anything about painting?' And everybody looked around, you know, with these blank stares, until finally I said, 'OK, let's get to it.'"

Silbert financed the foundation's first residence, a dilapidated former Soviet consulate building, with money out of her own pocket. She bought the house for $150,000, and set about fixing it up. None of the group had any construction knowledge. "We bought a book about electrical wiring," she says. "I was the one who could read, so I read the book out loud, and together we figured it out." They followed the same pattern with all the repairs in the house. "We just kept learning until we created a construction company."

AT THE END OF THE DAY, THE test is: "Does it work?" Since Delancey Street was founded, more than 14,000 people have passed through its doors, making it one of the largest rehab programs in the United States. It is also one of the most successful. Because the foundation doesn't accept government money, it isn't required to keep statistics, but longtime supporter John Burton, president of the California senate, estimates that fewer than 10 percent of Delancey's graduates return to jail. Compared with other programs, where a 25 percent success rate is considered excellent, he says, "Delancey Street is simply in another league."

Back in the cafeteria, the morning crew has cleaned up from breakfast, and a group of men and women sit chatting near the door. Asked whether he thinks he might be ready to leave after six years, Gerald stops to think. "Nah," he grins. "Delancey Street is my home. It's the only place I've ever contributed anything positive in my life, and my friends here are the only family I have. Why would I leave?" ●