

2: Dr. Mimi Silbert

Delancey Street Foundation



WE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

“**W**E TAKE ONLY THE WORST.” And by “worst,” Mimi Silbert, co-founder and president of the San Francisco-based residential program Delancey Street Foundation, means just that: ex-felons, prostitutes, substance abusers—just about anyone who has hit rock bottom. Residents apply for admittance, just like they would to a university. But unlike Harvard or Stanford, Delancey Street only accepts the neediest of the applicants, essentially the bottom of the class.

For the past 35 years, Delancey Street has provided its residents with academic, vocational, and social skills. This includes the discipline, values, and attitudes needed to legitimately succeed in society. Currently, 2,000 men and women are served through their centers around the country. More than 14,000 of its successful graduates are fully integrated back into society as taxpaying citizens leading successful lives. They are now lawyers, realtors, truck drivers, sales people, mechanics, and medical professionals in various fields.

Clients pay nothing, nor does the bill go to the taxpayers like so many other community rehabilitation organizations. Amazingly, this program is entirely self-sustaining through enterprise revenue and private donations. Naysayers believe criminals cannot be rehabilitated and therefore should not be let back into society. They ignore the fact that United States recidivism rates show that 67.5 percent of released criminals are re-arrested within three years. Delancey Street is proof that change is possible and that miracles can and do happen.

Credit all of this to the almost five-foot tall, diminutive dynamo, Dr. Mimi Silbert. She's a modern-day female David determined to slay her Goliath, and dislikes society's belief that criminals deserve what they get and should simply rot in prison. Mimi's battle plan was to implement the

principle of helping others help themselves. Armed with doctorate degrees in psychology and criminology, she has worked as a prison psychologist, police trainer, and college professor to accomplish her mission.

Born in Boston, Mimi grew up in a neighborhood she describes as a ghetto, much like the famous down-and-out Delancey Street in New York City where immigrants lived with extended families. "We were the classic immigrant family. I grew up with an underdog mentality. Everybody looked out for everybody else as we struggled upward." This model is the rock she used to create her foundation, even naming it after Delancey Street. "These family groups pooled their resources and worked hard to help one another move up in society. It's what happens here now, every day. Together, we rise or fall. That feeling of camaraderie is how I was brought up."

Mimi Silbert put the values and idealism that stemmed from her youth into action in 1971 when she met and befriended former prisoner John Maher. Together, they decided to start a small residential program for ex-cons and drug addicts. They started with a \$1,000 loan and four residents. "Imprisoning criminals," she says, "at someone else's expense, providing all their food and lodging and letting them just sit there with no responsibility is absurd. If you care about people, you hold them accountable." They began to house these ex-criminals and help them by providing counseling, teaching trade skills, instilling accountability, and putting them to work. When Maher died of a heart attack in 1988, Mimi carried on with the mission, and the program grew exponentially.

Today Delancey Street Foundation functions in precisely the way Mimi and John originally mapped it out, but on a much larger scale. Mimi personally designed the residence buildings that cover a huge square block of prime real estate in San Francisco. Ex-con residents with construction trade skills instructed and trained 300 formerly unemployed drug addicts, homeless people, and ex-felons. Together with union support, they built their very own four-story, massive complex. "If they didn't get a wall straight," she says, "we took it down and did it over." Built right on the Embarcadero, along the breathtaking bay waterfront, it was built at about half the cost of normal construction.

In 1990, the headquarters of Delancey Street moved into the new

400,000-square-foot facility built entirely by the hands of its formerly unemployable residents. This is a testimony to what can be accomplished when the disadvantaged of society are afforded opportunity. The building became home to 500 residents, including Mimi, who has a small, one-bedroom apartment there.

Delancey Street is self-supporting, running more than a dozen various training schools for its residents. These training schools provide vocational skills and the opportunities to put them to use, generating income and pooling the monies earned. Each resident plays an integral role. The foundation evolved and now runs a moving company, a popular gourmet restaurant and catering service, an event planning company, limousine and paratransit driving services, a special events decorating company, a bookstore, a café and art gallery, an automotive service center, a printing company, and a Christmas tree sales lot.

Mimi believes in and demands excellence in each of these diverse Delancey Street training schools, guaranteeing a high level of quality in their products and services. For example, diners entering the brick-front Delancey Street Restaurant delight in superb cuisine and friendly ambiance, often without realizing that every single person working in the restaurant, from the waiters to the chef, are residents of Delancey—all of them ex-felons and former drug addicts. Their culinary arts training program is so respected that those who graduate are in great demand by restaurants in the area.

Over the past 30 years, the residents, ranging in age from 18 to 68, have built and/or remodeled with sweat equity more than 1,500 units of very low-income housing, training over 800 people in construction trades. The ventures together earned about \$12 million in 2002. Its residents run the entire organization. There is no paid staff. Even Mimi herself does not take a salary.

About 70 percent of residents enter Delancey Street as an alternative to prison or a condition of parole or probation; the rest arrive straight off the streets. The average resident has been jailed four times, has been a drug addict for 12 years, and is illiterate. "Approximately one-fourth are women, one-third African American, one-third Hispanic, and one-third Caucasian," explains Silbert.

The minimum stay at Delancey Street is two years; the average stay is four years. During their stay, those without a high school diploma must earn a GED in classes taught by other residents. They are also trained in three different marketable job skills before graduating—one manual, one clerical, and one dealing with public service. Upon graduation, they are placed in outside jobs. More than 90 percent of the residents successfully complete the program and go on to lead law-abiding lives.

Mimi tells her residents, "We teach you absolutely everything you need to know to make your life work *without* drugs or crime and to be successful at every level." She challenges any ex-prisoners who show signs of slacking: "You want to quit? That's what you have always done, given up when it got difficult. If you're too angry and hopeless to fight for yourself, then do it for the next guy." High expectations of small social-skill details positively influence residents, like dressing for dinner and attending opera and symphony performances. Says Mimi, "We are helping people become middle class in their values and attitudes."

Delancey Street to date has moved more than 10,000 violent gang members into active nonviolence. More than 5,000 Delancey residents have mentored others, teaching nonviolence and inter-racial mediation. The payoff is huge, even affecting their own homefront. "Despite the violent and criminal backgrounds of our residents, there has never been one arrest in the 25 years we've operated. Gang members once sworn to kill one another are now living in integrated dorms and working together cooperatively and peacefully."

Sometimes Mimi has even fought to get California laws changed to benefit her graduates. "We got the first ex-felon admitted to the bar in California. We also had the first to get a real-estate license and the first to become a deputy sheriff. We even worked to get ex-felons the right to vote."

Mimi uses her criminal justice background to affect the world of society's castaways even beyond the borders of Delancey Street. She recently designed and implemented new juvenile justice programs for San Francisco, developing a one-stop Community Assessment Center for arrested youths, a girl's residential program, and two after-school "Safe Havens," a program to develop the strengths of at-risk youths. Additionally, she

continues to design and provide training to more than 50 police, sheriff, and probation departments. She is driven to make a difference.

As a single mother, Mimi raised twin boys with help from her extended Delancey family. Son David, now 33 and a San Francisco lawyer, jokes, "I thought everyone had former pimps and prostitutes picking them up at school."

Now in her sixties, Mimi shows no signs of slowing down. "For 32 years, I've seen the lower 10 percent of society come through our door and walk out a few years later as strong, decent human beings. If a bunch of ex-cons, prostitutes, and drug addicts can bounce back against the odds, just imagine what you and I might accomplish through helping others help themselves." Dr. Mimi Silbert can sum up her entire philosophy in these words: "It does not matter how many mistakes you make, it only matters that you fix them."

≈ Ripples

SHIRLEY LAMARR

"THERE IS NO WAY I'd go back to my old life. I went through the whole siege of drugs and prostitution, guns drawn on me, getting raped, and overdosing on pills . . . you name it. I've robbed people, all kinds of stuff, and each year I'd feel more disgusted. I lived on the street with my own space on the sidewalk," shared Shirley. "When I was arrested, I sent a letter to Delancey Street. I was at the bottom with a choice of coming here or going back out to die."

Shirley Lamarr was a second-generation prostitute, criminal, and drug addict with a daughter who followed her lead into drugs and prostitution. Shirley entered Delancey Street in 1990 at 40 years old. It was her last hope. Three years later, she graduated and married a man who was a fellow graduate. Together they went on to direct their own rehabilitation program, also in Northern California, modeled on the principles they had learned.

Shirley helped her daughter escape from a prison of drugs and pimps and later she poured the same devotion into helping her rebellious grand-

daughter, who graduated high school in 2002 and went on to become a college student. After three generations of self-destruction and crime, the cycle had finally been broken and replaced with a legacy of new life and hope.

► Delancey Street, founded by Mimi Silbert and John Maher in 1971, is considered the nation's leading self-help residential education center for former substance abusers and ex-convicts. More than 14,000 of society's former misfits and castaways have graduated from Delancey. More than 90 percent of them successfully complete the program and go on to lead law-abiding lives.

During their stay, residents learn academic and vocational skills, as well as responsibility, self-reliance, social survival, interpersonal skills, and positive values and attitudes. These skills are all necessary to live drug free in the mainstream of society, successful and legitimate. Delancey Street currently has residents located in five facilities in: New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Los Angeles, and its headquarters in San Francisco.

If the best of us care for and believe in the least of us, hope reigns—as on Delancey Street.

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