


 OUTSIDE THE BOX

The Delancey Street Foundation

The Delancey Street Restaurant in San Francisco offers panoramic views of the Embarcadero, an eclectic menu (featuring matzo-ball soup, spanakopita, and Szechuan noodles), and reasonable prices. The most unique aspect of this establishment, however, is the staff: every waiter, cook, and busboy (or girl) is a former criminal working without pay. The restaurant operates under the auspices of the Delancey Street Foundation, a self-supporting rehabilitation program for five hundred former inmates in the Bay area.

Founded in 1971 by Mimi Silbert, the Delancey Street Foundation predates many of today's reentry efforts by at least three decades. Silbert believes that the main problem with most prisoner rehabilitation programs is that they focus on only one aspect of reentry, such as drug abuse, education, or employability. At Delancey Street, residents learn three skills simultaneously by working at one or more of the Foundation's "training schools," which include the restaurant, a café, a moving company, a car service, and an annual Christmas tree sale. Each participant is also required to earn a high school equivalency diploma (if necessary) and has the opportunity to take classes toward a bachelor of arts degree from San Francisco State University. In addition, all

residents take a pledge to remain drug and alcohol free as long as they remain in the program.

Delancey Street is based on the idea that the residents will support and teach each other; therefore, it has no counselors, therapists, or social workers. More than 14,000 people have successfully completed the program, with many of the graduates moving into private business or public service; one was even elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. To those who believe that the Foundation represents a "soft on crime" philosophy, Silbert responds that each resident puts in twelve- to fifteen-hour days at the various training schools, not counting homework. The easiest life for convicts, she points out, is often back in prison, where the government takes care of them. "What is hard on criminals," Silbert says, "is to insist that they be accountable, that they work hard, and that they give back."

FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Why might an organization such as the Delancey Street Foundation be more successful at reentry than a more traditional program that provides separate drug treatment or education to ex-convicts who have returned to their homes?