



REMARKABLE LEADERS

Risk Takers Who Dare Us!

*Senator John Glenn
Bertrand Piccard
James Cameron*

*President Bill Clinton & Chelsea
Justice Sandra O'Connor
And many more...*

Doris Lee McCoy, Ph.D

Chapter 7

Having At Risk Kids & Turning Criminals into Productive Citizen

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MIMI SILBERT, Ph. D., Founder, President and CEO of Delancey Street Foundation

Doris Lee: Dr. Mimi Silbert, I have followed your career for many years, and you are one of those featured in my book, America's New Future: 100 New Answers. What would you say is the secret behind helping people with major challenges to create a productive and happy life?

Before I even answer, I just have to say you're fantastic, and your constant commitment to moving life forward for all of us is great.

To me, one of the most important things behind what we do is that, unlike most non-profits, we don't have a staff and we're not funded. Instead, we rely on the people who have the problems to become their own solution. We do that by something we call, "Each one teach one, and each one help one."

Our average resident is now a third generation gang member. They've gone in and out of prison, basically, their whole lives. They even have grandmothers in gangs.

Grandmothers in gangs too?

Grandmothers in gangs – which speaks to a level of despair, because when it spans three generations you don't even have role models to look to. Violence just becomes what life is to you, and you're mostly at the receiving end of life. You are the underclass of society, which either receives help, donation, or punishment, but you are never called upon to give.

Society is always worried about what we can do for them to get them to stand up, to be stronger and healthier, but at the Delancey Street we need them. When you have no staff and you have no funding, you need the people in your extended family. We've run it like an extended family, you need them to rise up to be the best of themselves and give to each other.

It's in that process of acting as if you are already a better person – a responsible person who can be counted on – that you actually become one. Our residents have to teach what they've just learned to the newer person; that's what they spend more time thinking about. It's in the teaching that they learn themselves. For example, if you read at the tenth grade level, you're tutoring someone who reads at the eighth grade level, and that person is tutoring someone who reads at the sixth grade level.

If you have started to understand why it's important to never to lie about little things, then you begin to teach other people. It's not just the big things that matter, it's the slow development of character and the fact that your word means something; the fact that you stand for principles. What matters is that you believe in things that are bigger than you can come to know that you can affect those things. It's in the doing that we actually change. I like to say change is a verb. It's something

we must do. We can't talk about it, we can't just hear about it, we can't feel it. We have to jump up and do it.

They're forced to do that at Delancey Street, because there's no other way to do it for them and it's phenomenal what they then rise up to.

Is there a system that they have to follow?

We laugh and call them the 999 basic rules. It starts with everything. You know, many of our people have lived on the streets. They have to learn how to take a shower, how to make a bed; we're down to the very basics.

We're still bouncing quarters off of the beds to make sure that the bed is made correctly. You learn your most basic habits. You learn how to speak and how to develop your vocabulary so that everyone speaks the best form of our language.

People are tutored to get their high school degree equivalency. We also teach art appreciation where everyone goes to museums and music appreciation where we go from blues concerts to jazz concerts to the opera and to the symphony.

We teach people through our business training school. We have a restaurant, a moving company and numerous products that we make and sell. They all learn three marketable skills. They learn academics, and they learn how to dress, how to communicate well, how to interact productively. Most importantly, they learn the values and attitudes that give rise to integrity. That's our primary focus.

What do you mean by integrity?

Basic integrity, decency, and helping others; volunteers, including me, run our entire place. I live here, and don't take a salary. All of our job positions at every level of the organization are to be positive role models.

We are also extraordinarily structured, very strict. We need to be, because as I said, the majority of our people have been in gangs. These gangs are sworn to kill one another by race or by where they live. They've had a lot of violence and they need to balance out their past by giving and helping and making the world better.

We teach them to believe this is our society and it's up to us to now make it better – especially those of us who have caused society a little more pain. They volunteer with kids in schools, and they help the elderly.

We have no violence. It's just phenomenal that people who are sworn to kill one another are living together in integrated dorms. We teach each other to read, spell, and learn the values that eventually make people proud of themselves instead of guilt-ridden and angry.

I saved a letter your group sent out after 9/11. It was a touching Valentine's Day greeting about the need to learn how to get along with people different from ourselves in order to end terrorism.

Exactly, you might disagree totally on the fact that my God is blue and your God is green; my beliefs are purple, your beliefs are orange. Yet it's the joy of life to put them all together to make a rainbow. The idea is not to wipe out some of the colors of the world ... the purples, the greens, and

the oranges. It's horrible to live with hate inside you, believing that revenge will solve the issue. It never has; it never will. You can't live with hate dominating your life.

Mimi, could you take us through how somebody new would come into your facility, maybe angry at another gang member who is right on their same floor? How does that start to change people?

First of all, you have to write us. For example, no judge, no president, and no mommy can say, "Please help this person." Whether you mean it or not, you would have to write from jail, or wherever you are, and ask for yourself, "Please help me."

If you're on the streets, we have a bench that is right at the front when you come through the gate into our front office. You can just sit yourself on it twenty-four hours a day. It means, "Please come interview me. I need help."

We don't take sex offenders, because I believe they need professional help and we do not do professional counseling, but otherwise, our interview process isn't based heavily on the past. We base everything on the fact that you can start all over again. You can learn; you can learn to be decent, you can learn to be kind and you can learn love, which is really the center of it.

The interviews, done by other residents, are primarily about listening to the tone with which you tell your story. When the focus is on a person you hate or you're blaming, we will stop the interview and ask, "Then why am I interviewing you? If it's another gang that's caused all your problems or it's a particular person you hate then I should interview that person, because obviously that person controls your life. You don't control your own life, because all you're telling me is about someone else." They have to stop and say, "No, I control my life. This is what they did to me."

Then we again say, "No, we can only help change *you*. You have to understand that this is what *you* do to you. No matter what someone else does to you, you have to live the right, decent, correct and good life, or you will hate yourself, and you will just keep doing stupid things."

It all starts in the interview and our refusal to focus on the times in their lives when things have been horrible. The message is that it doesn't matter what anybody else does – this is *your* life; you control it and what matters is what you do with it. We each get to choose how we respond to life, and upon arriving at our front door people find out that choosing hate and anger doesn't work here.

We put everyone in integrated dorms. We have learned that we can't change our lives by ourselves, so here we are. We're one big "we." I tell our people, "You're all the 'we,' and I'm a 'we' too, because I live here." No matter how many tattoos – in many cases, hatred is made visible through tattoos – we are here together, sleeping next to one another. A person with swastikas, lightning bolts, and pro-Nazi comments, sleeping next to a Mexican-mafia gang person covered with entirely different tattoos, or a black person covered with the symbols and statements of his gang.

These people's hate just becomes too mean. I sometimes tease them when they can't sleep and tell them, "Okay, so the person you want revenge on is sleeping soundly in their bed, and you are staying up all night like a lunatic, pacing and angry. You can't let them win that way. Get rid of your hate and sleep."

I'm like a mother figure. I love them. They love me and we're climbing a mountain together. I tell them, "I might be closer to the top of the mountain, and you might feel closer to the bottom but the truth is; the people at the bottom hold the power. If you pull in a negative direction, we'll all fall

down the mountain – and Delancey Street will be over. If you pull each other up, we'll all make it up. And the pie is big enough for all of us, so here we go."

Initially, they don't feel it, but out of respect for a place that took them in when no one else wanted them – that believes in them when they don't believe in themselves – out of just that simple basic, loyalty, they don't act on their hatred. Slowly as time goes by, they see themselves doing better.

When you take your model and look at the world, how can this be used? Would it work in India and Africa?

We've started a training institute where we're teaching people from twenty different countries. Singapore sent people here. We have people come here who are working with Aborigines in New Zealand and Australia. It's interesting because in all countries, including our own, it's easier to start with the people who have hit bottom, because everyone recognizes that change has to happen there.

The wonderful thing is when people graduate from a place like ours and they can teach it to their own children. They can also teach the system to their families, their friends, and the people they work with. It penetrates and bubbles up into society.

This system is slowly making its way around the world and the country. We now have about eight locations. They can't call themselves the Delancey Street, but they can call themselves a replication of Delancey Street, and on their own they're taking the model forward.

We can't force change, that's why prisons just don't work that well, because the people themselves haven't chosen to change.

You're talking about power. It would be good if you told readers how tall you are.

With a little poof on my hair, I'm five feet even.

Many of our residents are gigantic, muscular. Some of them have spent a total of twenty-five years in prison, and that's twenty-five years pumping iron. They are huge!

They say that the gentle giants treat you in a very gentle way, because they respect you.

Yes, and in all honesty, I love them. It's like they are my children, and my family. It helps them to understand love a little better and to understand the power of love, which is extraordinary. Together, we discover that caring, giving, and doing provides an extraordinary sense of power. With that power, people start to really listen to you.

Looking at our people struggling against all that negativity, and trying so hard to help someone else, I feel like it saves my life every day. It's a difficult time in the worked right now, and it is all too easy to get cynical. Truthfully, you come to a place like the Delancey Street, and it brings back every childlike belief in hope and goodness.

It's refreshing and renewing?

Exactly, refreshing and renewing, and sometimes you forget that incredible things are possible. If you only looked at the lives of our five hundred people in San Francisco on paper – what they have been through and how much hatred dominated their lives – it would be easy to just say the world is spiraling downward.

Then you listen to them tell each other how they were once an enemy; someone to kill and now they say, “Here, let me show you. I can make this easier for you. We can do it together.” It makes you believe in the system.

You’re saying five hundred people are now in your facility?

Yes, in San Francisco alone. We’ve got several hundred in Los Angeles and a couple hundred in New Mexico. The facilities are of different sizes.

For example, our North Carolina Facility is very small, thirty people, because there are some who actually need a very small family. They’re so pulled inward and so hopeless, and five hundred people are just too many for them to feel connected to.

Each facility looks different, but it’s the same process. You have to make your bed the same way. We teach everyone to “act as if.” Act as if you are decent, act as if you care, act as if you’re a professional, act as if you’re an executive at one of Bill Gates’ companies so that you walk with your head held high.

I must say, we differ from many modern companies, because we teach our people to wear coats and ties. It’s a joke I make when we go to certain big events and some of our people come with me. I say, “You can tell who the ex-convicts are in the room amongst the doctors, lawyers and professionals; we’re the people in the suits.”

Mimi, what happened when you were honored by the University of California and you brought some of the Delancey people in tuxes with you?

To be Alumni of the Year at UC Berkeley, everyone else is a Nobel Prize Winner...and then there’s me. I gave my little speech. I talked some about my experiences, they showed a nice video, and then I said, “This beautiful thing you’ve given me belongs to the residents of Delancey Street, and there is one person at each of your tables. Yes, they are former gang members, armed robbers, prostitutes, etc. These people have carried on intelligent conversations with you. Would our people please stand.”

Our people stood, and within seconds, everyone in the room stood up for them. It’s extraordinary how much people are moved by someone’s ability to change, because if people with that level of anger and hatred can change, then the world can change. That is what changing the world *is*. It’s getting at the root of the hatred that underlies the poverty and the horrors.

In most cases, your people don’t end up back in jail. Do you have any statistics?

Right now in California, seventy percent of the people who get out of prison go back to prison. I can claim that, at the minimum, seventy percent of what are now over 15,000 graduates of Delancey Street don’t go back to prison or jail or do drugs.

For our 30th anniversary (we’re now in our 38th year), we spent a lot of time tracking graduates and inviting them all to a *prom*. You have to remember, most of our people have never gone to high school, so we had a homecoming weekend and a prom. We tracked 14,000 graduates, and talked with many of them on the phone. Most were doing something in addition to raising healthy families and working hard – they were volunteering at something, doing pancake suppers at church, bringing food to people with AIDS, working with kids in need, and some were volunteering in other countries.

When one of our 15,000 people goes back to prison, that one person has probably positively changed the lives of 10 people. I like to say, “It’s not just that we’ve stopped them from doing negative acts – yes that statistic is good – but there’s a statistic that no one can measure: how many lives a positive life can change. That’s a great statistic.”

Is there something that you see different now than you did when you started thirty-eight years ago?

Yes, when we started people were first generation drug addicts and criminals, and now, on the average, our residents are third generation.

When we started, people had positive role models – they just weren’t following any of them. Now our residents honestly don’t know what we’re talking about at the start of our program. Having positive role models is not a world they know.

We so desperately need to reverse that. Hatred and revenge are getting embedded. When you look at poverty and the horrible struggles happening to people, you say, “I can understand how they feel angry and vengeful.” I understand it too, but we just have to stop it.

Understanding it isn’t enough.

The divided way we’re living today, it will never solve anything. We all better jump in the one lifeboat – that is our world – because no one is going to win if we keep this up.

There are so many ways to help; teach a little class, send some books, or send a letter that I could read to everybody. Buy one of our Christmas trees. We also have a national moving company and have received the BBB “No Complaint Award” for many years.

Christ George Schultz, former U.S. Secretary of State, is a dear friend. He regularly stops by, and he simply tells our people, “I admire you. I admire everything you’re doing, and thank you for making the world better.” Sometimes just your words of belief make all the difference in the world.

Any final words?

Thank you...because spreading hope is what you do phenomenally well. Honestly, what the world needs now are people who keep spreading the word that impossible things are possible. It just takes the willingness to take some risks and fail, and then pick yourself up and take more risks, and then succeed!

You’re doing that, you’re spreading that word, so my final words are “thank you.”

I appreciate that. How can people who are interested in helping the Delancey Street Project do that?

People are welcome to call us, our headquarter number is (415) 512-5190

If you know people who have totally hit bottom, then call (415) 512-5104, and that way we can help them.

People can donate money, or when they’re moving, they could use our moving company. If they’re hungry, they can hire us for catering in New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, or Los Angeles or they can eat at our restaurant in San Francisco.

Dr. Mimi Silbert has shared with us her years of experience, her years of struggle and joy. She's such a gift to this whole world. Thanks so much, Mimi

Visionary Reflection on...

Meaning

As too many of us know, years of chronic stress, turmoil abuse, or addiction leaves us feeling disconnected from our own inherent value, significance, and contribution. Very often, regaining a sense meaning comes from stepping beyond our limitations in order to benefit others in some small or large way. Today, simply take inventory of the things that connect you with meaning...and give thanks for them.



Dr. Mimi Silbert with Doris Lee