

California Living

The Stars Come Out For Delancey Street

By Eve Pell

Hundreds of celebrities, would-be celebrities, and just plain folks gathered (at \$100 a head) several Saturdays ago in the balloon-filled Hyatt Regency Ballroom to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Delancey Street Foundation, the quixotic, colorful outfit which rehabilitates convicts, drug addicts, and other "disordered types."

It was an amazing night. The fellow in the horn-rimmed glasses with the smiling kid on his knee was Roger Vadim, formerly husband to Brigitte Bardot and Jane Fonda, as well as long-time lover of Catherine Deneuve. The smiling kid was Vanessa, his daughter with Jane. Vanessa's stepfather, Tom Hayden, was there, too.

The rumpled, curly-haired guy who exuded friendliness was Oscar-winner Albert Finney. And the quiet, serene, middle-aged Chicano was Cesar Chavez. One that night, even warring politicians gingerly put aside personal feuds to offer congratulations to the ex-cons. Assemblymen Leo McCarthy and Howard Berman, whose battle last year for the speakership set off unparalleled blood-letting in Sacramento, both came to the party.

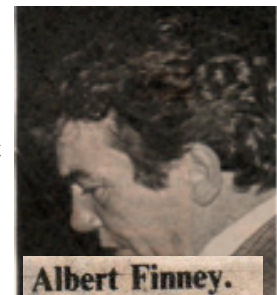
"On that night, even warring politicians gingerly put aside personal feuds to offer congratulations to the ex-cons."

Others in the crowd included Assessor Sam Duca and Airport Commissioner Mo Bernstein, Milton Salkind of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, judges Donald Constone and Edward Cragen, existential psychologist Dr. Rollo May and Mike Farrell of M*A*S*H. Socialites Lia Belli and Al Wilsey bought tables and donated the seats so Delancey Street residents could attend. In a remarkable tribute to an organization which has from time to time lambasted law enforcement, delegations from the Oakland and San Francisco Police Departments were there.

They all were gathered to honor people you have probably never heard of – like Abe Irizarry, Pat and Susan Donelly, Bill Tolliver – people who left behind careers as dope fiends, thieves, hookers and con artists to become successful in legitimate businesses and happy, to boot. And to honor John Maher, the outspoken man who founded the organization, beginning with a Bush Street flat and a little money hustled from loan sharks.

Himself an ex-convict, Maher has become a respected authority on rehabilitation. And his gift of gab has made him one of the most interviewed personalities in the Bay Area. He has presided over the establishment and expansion of Delancey Street while also taking on what he considers to be injustice and inequity in the community and in the criminal justice system. He sums up his career by saying, "When you're incompetent and got no education, you can be either one of two things: you can be a bum, or a great social leader. I failed as a bum, so I had no choice."

In an era which has seen other organizations with high ideals swallowed up by disaster and horror, Delancey Street not only survives but flourishes.



“It’s not one of those cults of personality things,” said Congressman John Burton, sitting back from his roast beef diner at the tenth anniversary celebration. “It’s unusual in this country because it works. The government spends billions of dollars trying to rehabilitate people in prison and it doesn’t work. Delancey Street just does it.”

How come this off-beat group succeeds where others fail? You get a lot of different answers.

Jim Tolliver, a handsome, bearded black man at the celebration, has known the place since it opened. Eldest of a family dissolved by divorce, Jim and three brothers were put into foster homes. When Bill, the next eldest, got into trouble, Jim brought him to Delancey Street to be straightened out. Later, Bill and Jim brought in Mike and, finally, Steven. Delancey Street saved their lives, says Jim, who has seen all too many lives lost in Oakland’s black community, where he is the Director of East Oakland’s Development Center.

“Most people become drug-involved because of alienation from their family,” He observed. “Delancey Street is a family. It provides the individual a sense of purpose and self-worth which everybody needs. Family is where it’s at.”

Bill Tolliver, now a licensed mortician and a vice-president of the Foundation, was the evening’s master of ceremonies. Elegant and poised, he welcomed the audience and introduced the bands which donated their services for the evening: Cal Tjader, John Coppola, Etta James.

Roger Vadim, the man who master-minded the careers of the western world’s hottest sexpots, has never known the kinds of problems faced by the Tolliver family. A relaxed, easy-going fellow, he once went to Delancey Street’s New Mexico ranch with his ex-wife Jane Fonda and her present husband Tom Hayden for a vacation with daughter Vanessa.

The atmosphere impressed him. Speaking in his rather French English, he described his reaction. “All my life I have not liked groups. When I was young I did join the Scouts; I did not join the Army (although there were political reasons for that as well). I am reluctant with any organization. But to my surprise this one has the best relationship with people I have seen for years and years. There is no political stress, no intolerance, no. ‘I’m impressed because of who you are.’”

Private eye Hal Lipset was sitting at a table taken for the event by Assembly Speaker Willie Brown. “There are a lot of weak people in the world,” he said. “Delancey Street takes them and teaches them to stand on their own feet. They are given inner strength.” Next to Lipset is former Charter Commissioner Pat Schultz, who in years past helped Delancey Streeters get a college education.

Bill North, a quiet black man who was a member of the world championship Oakland A’s and now is lead-off hitter for the Giants, attended with his friend Tom Baenziger, president of the Dollar Company of Palo Alto. Baenziger met Maher seven years ago while still a law student, and coached the Delancey Street softball team. Baenziger kidded North about North’s baseball card picture: “Ugliest thing I ever saw. Looks like something you’d see in the Post Office.”

North believes in what Delancey Street is doing – so much so that he said he is going to donate \$100 for every base he steals this year at Candlestick Park to the Foundation.

And, he said, he’s going to ask the fans to send money also. Since North has two of the fastest legs in baseball, this could be a windfall for the ex-cons and ex-addicts. By himself, said Baenziger, North’s stolen bases could bring in \$5,000; and with the fans’ help, \$100,000.

Supervisor Richard Hongisto, former two-term sheriff of San Francisco, has been a supporter of Delancey Street for years. “The longer I’m in government, the more aware I am that it doesn’t work very well,” he observed.

“Government can’t hire a John Maher, and even if it could it wouldn’t know what to do with him. He has gold ideas and non-conforming notions.

“When I was sheriff, I cooperated with Delancey Street,” he added. “I gave them access to the jail. All they could do was straighten out our prisoners for free.” He said he wished that organizations like Delancey Street would “be the future of corrections.” Their system, he said, not only works better, is free to the taxpayers, but also is kinder.

Hongisto said he thinks the system works “because of the collective wisdom of their members directed toward a goal. People can march together like a team.” Tomorrow Delancey Street would be back at work fixing cars, moving furniture, repairing lives. But tonight this family of Cinderellas was the toast of the town.