

The San Diego
Union-Tribune.

Delancey Street criminal rehabilitation center urged for San Diego

By CAITLIN LIU



UNION-TRIBUNE

Judge Ehrenfreund:
*Praise for
Delancey Street.*

For years, Fred Helander couldn't look at himself in a mirror.

The former San Diego resident says he began doing drugs at 12. By high school, he had hit the downward spiral. He did whatever it took to support his addiction: burglaries, dealing drugs, manufacturing methamphetamine.

In and out of jail, Helander's 5-foot 10-inch frame wasted to 100 pounds.

Today, the 31-year-old runs an in-line-skate rental shop and also is head chef at a restaurant. Tan, clean-shaven and robust, Helander has remained sober for the past three years.

He gives the credit for his success to his new-found family of ex-con and former drug-addict co-workers, mentors and friends at a program called Delancey Street in San Francisco.

And now, hailing Delancey Street as the "the world's most successful rehabilitation program for criminal offenders," Superior Court Judge Norbert Ehrenfreund is spearheading an effort to bring the organization to San Diego.

During a meeting in his courtroom last week, the judge urged a diverse group of government officials, professors and leaders from public service organizations and law enforcement agencies to consider what he said could be "a giant step in the criminal justice system."

"Delancey Street is a very odd organization," said co-founder and President Mimi Silbert, who holds a Ph.D. in criminology from UC Berkeley. "We're not a traditional drug rehabilitation program."

Most striking is Delancey Street's refusal to accept government handouts. This stems from the organization's primary goal of teaching self-reliance, Silbert said. Delancey Street stays afloat by owning and operating businesses, such as a restaurant and a moving company in San Francisco.

If a center is to be established in San Diego, Silbert said, the community must support the organization's goals and efforts. It will need help to find a suitable building. Also, the people must be hospitable to the center's residents and businesses.

The organization consists of Silbert at the helm and about 1,000 residents at five centers nationwide. It has no other professional staff. Every aspect of Delancey Street — housekeeping, business accounting, tutoring and real estate development — is run by the people who live there.

A typical resident might be a former gang member, a skinhead, a prostitute or a pimp. Or perhaps a former drug dealer, robber, murderer — or all of the above. The average resident committed 18 felonies before coming to Delancey Street.

"We take in these (expletive) and we try to

teach them to be decent, productive citizens," Silbert said. That means immersing residents in old-fashioned values such as discipline, honesty and caring about others. Residents are expected to make Miss Manners proud.

"It was the first place where I had to earn my way, respect people and learn how to dress," said Abe Irizarry, a San Francisco center resident who, in his suit and tie, was indistinguishable from the lawyers and judges in the courtroom.

Irizarry has not always been this well-received in court. He was a drug addict at nine. Then he joined a gang and became a familiar face in prisons. Before Delancey Street, his home was San Quentin.

Today, Irizarry is drug-free and a maitre d'.

Despite the criminal pasts of the residents, Delancey Street has never experienced a single act of violence, Silbert said. That's because each resident, from day one, faces enormous peer pressure to become a productive member of the community.

And, in time, hard work, self-reliance and self-respect become internalized.

Delancey Street operates on a philosophy of each one, teach one, Silbert said. A new resident is tutored and coached by others who have been there longer, then the recent arrival is responsible for teaching other newcomers.

From this process, which takes an average of four years, residents learn at least three marketable skills and earn high school equivalency diplomas before graduating from Delancey Street.

Among the graduates, now 10,000 strong: truck drivers, lawyers, construction workers, teachers, counselors, advertising executives and business owners.

Stories about Delancey Street's successes compelled Ehrenfreund to invite Silbert to explore the possibility of opening a center in San Diego.

At first Silbert declined, reluctant to further expand the organization. But the judge's persistent phone calls and letters over the years impressed her, she said.

After the meeting, many went to shake hands with the visitors from Delancey Street. Some lingered to find out more about bringing a center to San Diego.

What happens next depends on the community. If people are interested, they can form a committee to help find a suitable building, Ehrenfreund said.

For now, Ehrenfreund said, a San Diego Delancey Street center remains "only an idea, only a dream."