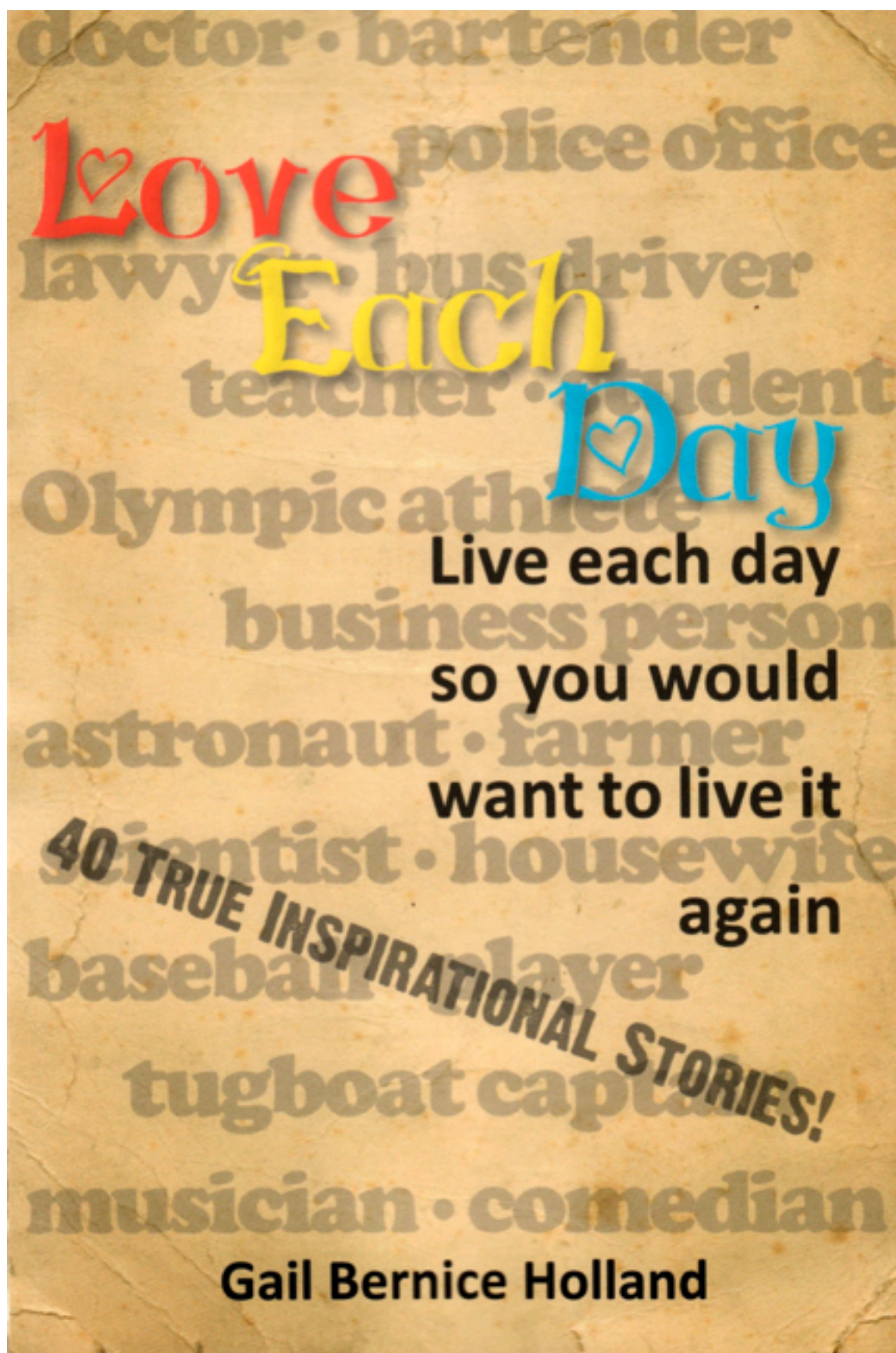


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A Day Helping Former Felons

Dr. Mimi Silbert has a huge extended family consisting of former felons, drug dealers, and gang members who are learning, under her guidance, to lead crime-free, drug-free lives. They all live together at the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco, a successful self-help, self-managed rehabilitation center founded by Silbert in 1971. One of the reasons for its success is there is no paid staff. The reformed convicts do the work, and in return receive housing, food, education, and many other services at no cost.

Equally important, vocational training schools are offered and the residents learn how to run Delancey Street restaurants, moving companies and other businesses. The goal is for residents to acquire new work skills, gain a sense of responsibility, and lose self-destructive habits. Silbert, who has a Ph.D. in criminology, also helps people who have dropped out of school obtain at least a high school equivalency degree. Over the years Silbert has built a rehabilitation empire – what she calls a “Harvard for losers.” There are now Delancey Street operations in Los Angeles, New Mexico, North Carolina, and New York.

Mimi Silbert wakes up at 7 a.m. the same way she often wakes up – with a telephone call asking for help. The call is from the Delancey Street facility in New York, and they’re concerned because they have just found out that one of their residents had lied to them. “I am the only person in all our facilities who can kick anyone out,” she explains. “Lying is not allowed, although sometimes I give people a second chance.”

Silbert lives and works at Delancey Street in San Francisco where there are about 500 residents. It’s not a 9 to 5 job because she’s available to help anyone at any time for any reason. Move over, she doesn’t view it as a job, but rather a way of life. It is also, she stresses, a life she loves because she is part of what she calls a “phenomenal” community.

The San Francisco facility covers an entire city block near the waterfront and includes a public restaurant built primarily by the ex-felons. “We built our own home, we do everything together. In the world outside of Delancey Street, you find people whining about getting their BMW fixed, or the fact they have to work overtime. At Delancey Street I live with people who were at the bottom of our society. I know they are capable of changing, and every time they succeed I get to ride behind them and see that anything is possible.”

On this morning the residents are in the process of fixing and painting an overhead bridge in the Mediterranean-style courtyard between the Delancey Street buildings. A sense of urgency hangs over the task because a wedding is also on the morning agenda. Hosting weddings, including the catering and flower arrangements, is one of the ways revenue is earned.

The bridge is completed on time and the wedding begins. While observing the wedding from the remodeled bridge Silbert was joined by her twin sons, their wives, and five grandchildren. One son lives in New York and so it was a special occasion for the family to be together. “My sons grew up at Delancey Street,” she says. “I am divorced but now they are married and both wives are public defenders. Isn’t that funny?”

Delancey Street has also become a tourist attraction. Tour groups, sometimes from different parts of the country, sometimes from around the world, arrive on a regular basis.

For each visit, Silbert chooses different residents to lead tours. On this day she asks one man who used to be an active skinhead to volunteer his time. “His entire body is covered with tattoos of swastikas and other symbols of hate and violence. My goal isn’t to shock tourists but to help them understand why crimes of hatred and vengeance take place.”

Silbert encourages her residents to be honest about their past when they meet visitors and to reveal not just why they once swam in the sewers of society, but also how they overcame obstacles to reach a better future. “I tell my people that you can never undo what you did, but you can do good things to balance the scales. And you can get excited about every minute that is positive.”

Besides the official tours, Delancey Street offers seminars. The purpose of these seminars, which are held every day, is to educate the residents about different subjects and debate issues so they ultimately learn not only how to express opinions, but also how to disagree with one another and not take it personally. When Silbert attended the seminar in the afternoon she found it was too boring and purposely injected controversy to accelerate interest in the subject. It’s her job, she acknowledges, to keep classes (and live) fun and informative.

Part of each day also involves sitting down with residents on an individual basis. Silbert stops to talk to one young man who has been at Delancey Street for only about a year. She knows his history: Both parents were drug addicts, and eventually he and his sister also go hooked on drugs and were put into foster care. At some point he ran away, and has been in and out of prison. Silbert uses this opportunity to urge him to obtain his high school equivalency degree. In addition, she suggests it might be cathartic to write a letter to his parents, even if it never reaches them.

The young man, who is almost illiterate, starts scrawling his feelings on paper: “Dear Mom, I am doing good. I know it doesn’t matter to you, but I am going to do good anyway. There are people here who love me...”

Recalls Silbert, “He was so brave, honest and child-like. It took a lot of courage to write that letter. I told him, ‘Say what hurts you but do not let it own you.’”

In the evening Silbert enjoyed dinner with her own children and grandchildren. Later she tackled some paperwork. She often doesn’t go to sleep until after midnight and rarely takes time to relax. “I don’t like to relax. I’m not good at it. I don’t play tennis or golf, and can’t meditate. However, I am lucky enough to be in a place that throbs with life.”

She is often asked how can she live with former criminals and not be scared. “The only thing I am scared of is bugs,” she responds.

Silbert also acknowledges that she is “a big crier.” Yet most of the time she sees and deals with the world around her through laughing eyes and a compassionate, passionate heart. “People say to me, ‘It is fantastic that you are sacrificing yourself to help others.’ They don’t get it! My life is the opposite of a sacrifice. I am so fortunate to see a miracle practically every day.”

For information go to www.delanceystreetfoundation.org