

Excerpts from 2008:

AMERICA'S NEW FUTURE

100 NEW ANSWERS

A GLIMPSE
OF THE FUTURE
BY 100 AMERICAN
DECISION MAKERS

Sandra Day O'Connor

David Rockefeller

Steve Forbes

J.W. Marriott

John Walsh

Quincy Jones

Larry King

Bill Novelli

and many more...

DORIS LEE McCOY, Ph.D.

Mimi Silbert, Ph.D.

Founder, Delancey Street Foundation

The Delancey Street facility in San Francisco had been mentioned many times by people I interviewed as an outstanding facility for retraining human behavior, breaking alcohol and drug dependency, and curtailing violence in former inmates. Statistics on former inmates across the country showed that few were able to escape their past lifestyle and were often returned to prison over and over again. It was hard to believe that any system actually was so different that it noticeably could change behavior. But being a psychologist and educator and realizing how important the process of this kind of change would be of great value to America's future, I contacted the school and went to talk with the administrator first hand.

"Delancey Street Foundation is known as the nation's leading self-help residential education center for former substance abusers and ex-convicts," their pamphlet reads. They currently have about 1000 residents located in five facilities throughout the country: New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Los Angeles, and headquartered in San Francisco.

The people at the facility are age 18 – 68; approximately 1/4 are women: 1/3 African-Americans, 1/3 Hispanic and 1/3 Anglo. **The average resident has been a hard-core drug addict for ten years, and has been in prison four times.** Approximately 70% come from the courts, probated, paroled, or sentenced as an alternative to prison; about 30% have been homeless prior to entering Delancey Street Project. In spite of all of the criminal and violent backgrounds of the residents, there have been only a few arrests in the 25 years that they have been in operation. The gang members who once swore to kill one another are now living in dorms and working together non-violently and cooperatively.

The average resident is functionally illiterate and unskilled when they enter. But the goal and requirement is that they take advantage of an equivalent high school degree and are trained in three different marketable skills before graduating. The minimum stay is two years, and the average is four years. They learn not only vocational and academic skills, but also interpersonal, and social survival skills. In addition, they learn attitudes, values, the sense of responsibility, and self-reliance that will enable them to

live in the outside, in the mainstream of society, drug-free, successful, and legitimate.

The pamphlet goes on to say that over 10,000 men and women have graduated into society as taxpaying citizens leading successful lives, including lawyers, truck drivers, sales people, the various medical professions, realtors, mechanics, contractors, President of the San Francisco Housing Commission, a deputy coroner, and a deputy sheriff. Another astounding fact was that the client accomplished the program at no cost to the taxpayer. They have never accepted any government funds, nor do they have any staff.

I must admit that I was skeptical of all of these claims as I arrived for the interview with Dr. Mimi Silbert, President and Founder of the Foundation.

Everyone there is a give and a receiver. The organization follows the idea of ‘each one teach one’. The residents who have been there longer, help the new ones and everyone works together. The foundation supports itself through training schools, which provide vocational skills to all the residents, who also pool their money.

We walked through the 370,000 square foot housing complex, which was primarily built and supervised by the residents. In the beginning there was only one who had previous training in construction. He had helped build a shuffle board court at San Quentin. This four-story complex covers an entire city block. The street level contains retail stores, a public restaurant and outdoor espresso café, and 177 units that overlook a Mediterranean-designed courtyard. Building this complex, we were told, provided a training program for 300 formerly unemployable drug addicts, homeless people and ex-felons. They learned every skill in the building trades with the strong support of the unions. In addition they had training in purchasing, contracting, computer, and accounting services. According to Mimi,

‘There is nothing else in the world like this self-built, self-managed, self-help complex.’ The complex is only a few blocks from the San Francisco Baseball Park.

Their brochure states **‘Ordinary people can transform extraordinary – even impossible – dreams into reality by pooling their resources, supporting one another, and living lives of purpose and integrity.’**

With all of this promo, I wondered how all of this could be possible. But Mimi herself proved it to me.

“I believe in this country we are using outmoded techniques. We know they’re not looking for change in behavior but we can’t stop these institutions to make a completely new process. If we could only start fresh, rather than trying to reduce and constantly fix something that’s too broken. I think the methods of teaching behavior are so broken that one day we’re going to have to acknowledge that. That day is coming I think within my lifetime. Then they’ll be able to ask, ‘What could we build new?’ Those of us who have been building it on the sidelines will be able to run in and say, ‘Here it is, it works!’ We could just flip it right into place; it doesn’t even have to cost much money.

Government money comes with the government. Our [American] prison system has been set up and carried on now for 200 years constantly trying to fix the program because no one is going to stop the process long enough to make a new one.

So people like me say I don’t want the government money because I don’t want the government involved because of the wrong approach they use. We would rather struggle...the ones who succeed show how it can be done. They make the country workable. Look at our U.S. companies -they are merging. We can’t do everything alone. So many of these other companies are joining together, just so they have a credit rating.

When you get ready to graduate from Delancey Street you go and get a job. You try to make a life for yourself. You have saved the money that you’re making from the job here at Delancey Street. By the time you graduate, you have a lot of money saved. You have enough to get an apartment, you have enough to buy a car, and you have friends. You have a large alumni club, lots of activities and connections.

The way society solves social problems is having programs with lots of experts. At Delancey Street we have low staff, low funding, so we say –

you can come here to give. In the process of giving to someone else, you will find that you rebuild your own life.

Our residents are learning things like Russian and English Literature and a wide range of academics. They learn about every kind of music from classical to jazz. We have wonderful teachers and so much to learn. The residents work very hard. They learn how to get jobs and learn marketable skills. We teach all those subjects and everyone does one difficult labor. We have a moving and construction company. They range from making furniture to wholesale advertising. We also have experts managing the restaurant and an expert chef. We do hire some outside people to help.

Everyone can work their way up from starting at the lower levels. You learn to drive a small truck and then you learn to drive a big diesel truck. Then you work in the office and do the basics, then the licensing, and then all the detailed jobs at the top. We are supervising a \$4-5 million-dollar industry. Those people are also teaching at the same time. You are always in a position to learn something new. **You are learning by doing rather than listening or watching. Everything we accomplish we accomplish by teaching. 'Teaching by actions' is our motto.**

It is the way to get people to change. In our system, mentors are mentors to other people within our facility. They are giving to others and see the positive effect they have on others. They have some power and this power makes them change. If you have nothing and you are nothing and you want to be somebody you have to do something about it. Our people have been somebody and that's the difference. That's where they are comfortable. That's what they know, that's where they are recognized so we keep sending people back to a world where they learn more and come out ahead.

If you don't teach them how to live legitimately and effectively, then they are going to live illegitimately and ineffectively. If, for example, you say, 'Here child, go to your room' and the child goes to his/her room for a few

hours, without friends/toys, or anything and so it's a punishment. If you say 'go to your room with your 10 best friends and your toys and stay there for 16 years', your child will make a life out of their room. That will become his life.

And that's what happens for long periods of time in real life situations when you are sent to prison. They stay there for a very long time. When that kid comes out of the room, he's going to do worse outside of his room than he did inside his room just like our former inmates. In our own system here at Delancey Street, it's not the same as 200 years ago. We can come up with other punishments and learn to change people. We have to teach people who don't learn in traditional ways and that can be the hard part. Everyone comes into Delancey Street lost. I see them all the time every week and I talk to them. I say I am here as your close friend. If you want to tear apart this facility I will take my doctorate degree and go earn a few hundred bucks and hour somewhere else."

UC Berkeley chose Dr. Silbert as Alumnus of the Year. She arrived with her guests, who dispersed themselves throughout the crowd, each sitting at a different table. Mimi acknowledged the award and then continued with her speech. She talked about her favorite subject, the Delancey Street Project. At the end she asked her guests to stand. Mimi then went on to introduce her guests. To everyone's total surprise, Dr. Silbert's guests were Delancey Street students who had been formerly incarcerated four times, and addicted to drugs and alcohol for at least 10 years. They had held their own in conversation, had appeared in full tux, which was the request of the day. This was obviously a "very well turned out" group, and Mimi and her guests received a rousing standing ovation!

Summary

The Advertising Council needs to be congratulated for all the free space they give for public service announcements that help promote awareness of our country's problems. Topics like alcoholism, drugs, violence, and disease are

presented in these announcements in commercial spots that would usually cost millions of dollars. Our leaders obviously want stronger laws to control the purchasing of guns and more accountability on the part of parents for their children and teenagers. Another key to combating drugs and violence is to have more attention given, and information supplied, about what anger really is, and how to deal with it in a constructive way. There is a lot of information available out there. It is up to the individual to seek it out.