

DAILY REPUBLIC

Rehabilitating futures Delancey Street first stop in life without prison

By Jess Sullivan
DAILY REPUBLIC

SAN FRANCISCO – Gerald Miller's parents were heroin addicts. His mother was murdered when he was 12. By the time his father dies three years later, Miller was already dealing heroin on the streets of Harlem.

Fast forward 10 years: Miller fled to San Francisco after ripping off other dealers. He survived by doing what he knew – dealing heroin, shooting up and robbing people at gunpoint.

Miller rolled in and out of California prisons where he still got high and perfected a more intense version of street survival. San Quentin followed by three months of freedom before being caught for more crimes. Folsom followed by two months out of the joint. Then Soledad.

During Miller's fourth time around, sitting in jail facing 24 years, somebody told Miller about Delancey Street. "It was either prison or two years at Delancey Street, so I wasn't a fool," Miller said. A few months later, in 1991, Miller was living in Delancey. He has been there ever since.

The last hope

While Miller's life of drugs, crime and violence may seem alien and wicked to many, there are tens of thousands of people with similar stories. Solano County has its own share of hard-core drug users among its nearly 3,000 drug arrests each year.

For many of Solano County's judges, attorneys and probation officers who regularly witness the downward spiral created by drug addiction, Delancey Street in San Francisco offers the best

hope, and sometimes the last hope, for helping addicts turn their lives around.

"There is simply no better program," says Mike Robak, the county's chief probation officer. Robak supervises four probation officers who do nothing but coordinate placing an average of 500 of the county's drug addicts every year into programs and then monitoring their progress (or lack of progress.)

Judge Eric Uldall shares Robak's views, calling Delancey the "crème de la crème" of treatment programs. As a deputy district attorney and as a judge, Uldall figures he has led as many as 250 addicts to Delancey's doorstep.

With an average of seven drug arrests made every day in Solano County, local criminal justice officials have developed a network of dozens of rehabilitation centers and programs where junkies go to try and overcome their addictions. Delancey Street is the most successful of these.

Nearly 30 years ago, Terry Watkins was the first probation officer in Solano County to place an addict into Delancey Street, shortly after Delancey first started. Since then Watkins has placed scores of "the worst of the worst" into the two-year residential program, which has grown to cover an entire city block and houses about 500 people at one time.

Currently, the Solano County Probation Department has close to 30 criminals trying to turn their lives around at Delancey. "It's been a symbiotic relationship over the years," Watkins said of the probation department's relationship with Delancey.

"These people have nothing to offer anyone when they go in," Watkins said of the typical

Delancey referral, who has been through the revolving door of prison anywhere from one to three times.

Mostly they're in their 30s and have been drug addicts for a decade or longer, according to Watkins.

"They're tattooed to the max and they're tired," Watkins said of his probationers who face the choice of more prison or spending at least two years at Delancey Street.

Unlike Miller, for many of them choosing state time would mean less time than the two years at Delancey.

"These guys are not intimidated by the idea of going to prison like you and I would be," Watkins said. "Most of them are actually scared to death at the idea of going to Delancey."

Nobody is forced into Delancey Street. They don't recruit, relying only on word of mouth among criminals and their keepers.

About 70 percent of Delancey residents are there by court order, having shown a judge a conditional acceptance letter after being interviewed by longtime Delancey residents. Most of the other arrivals at the Delancey doorstep were homeless.

"Sometimes I see them in court and I tell them they'll either change, or die or end up locked up forever," Uldall says of some of those he orders to Delancey.



Immigration

For Delancey's newest residents, the first moment of the rest of their life starts with "Immigration," when they sit on a wooden bench near the receptionist's counter. The bench, from New York's Ellis Island, symbolizes the change from one life to another, an immigration from an old world to a new world – from drug user to drug-free.

The bench also alludes to the life experience of Mimi Silbert, Delancey Street's co-founder and current president.

Silbert is largely responsible for helping create shape and grow Delancey Street with a program that emulates the experience of her Eastern European and Jewish ancestors who settled in East Brooklyn, surviving with their strong family bonds and within a close-knit community.

For their first 90 days at Delancey, new residents go through Maintenance. They carry out a daily routine that would be familiar to anybody who has survived basic training in the military, Watkins said, recalling his army days.

Alongside 30 to 40 other drug addicts, every day starts at 6:30 a.m. with breakfast and then cleaning. And then more cleaning. And then more cleaning interspersed with lunch, short breaks, some group attendance in seminars, still more cleaning, dinner, and more cleaning until 11 p.m.

"The structure is nothing new for most of them," Miller said. "They do the same thing in prison, but without the work."

Everybody is assigned a big brother, referred to as a "barber" who oversees that person's discipline, known as "doing the dishes," which is often accompanied by a dressing-down, or "getting a haircut."

Change is a slow process, often marked by two steps forward then one step back. Ultimately four out of five arriving at Delancey's door will leave clean, sober, employed and addiction-free. An 80 percent success rate is much higher than almost all other addiction treatment programs.

Everybody is also assigned to a single-sex group of 10-12 fellow residents with a single leader, and they live in dorm rooms, 10 to a room at the start.

"They do what they probably did when they went into prison – they follow someone around doing what that person does," Miller said of the routine.

"When I first showed up, everyone was dressed up and smiling. I started looking for other drug addicts, running into a few I'd know from the joint."

Like Miller did, new residents try to trick the system and many fight to resist change. Now in his ninth year at Delancey, Miller has seen the tricks, the denial, the resistance, the successes and the failures.

While most of those completing Delancey move on, a handful stay, like Miller, applying their street savvy to the social and professional world of Delancey.

There are only three absolute rules at Delancey Street: No drugs or alcohol, no violence and no threats of violence.

Keeping the peace is not easy. Helping people coexist in a co-ed world where everybody is, by design, supposed to be changing and growing all the time, Miller said sometimes it feels like he spends 99 percent of his time working out conflicts and disputes.

"The object for everybody is to just make it through the day," Miller said.

For some of the new arrivals the grueling schedule and work expectations are too much.

"I was never told about the long hours at Delancey," Jerry Jon Baldwin recently told Judge Luis Villarreal of the 12-to-16-hour days. Baldwin walked away from Delancey after two months only to be arrested two days later and is now back in prison doing two years.

Each one – teach one

Delancey does not dole out therapy or "getting in touch" with your problems. They do not have counselors.

Their approach is simple – they put you to work.

"They give them a sense of ownership," Watkins said, adding he has seen the transformation countless times. "They go from saying 'they' to saying 'we' when describing life at Delancey."

After maintenance, residents advance to jobs in one of Delancey's 20 business ventures, everything from the auto body shop, two restaurants, a print shop, Christmas tree lots, San Francisco's biggest moving company, a transportation company for the infirm and elderly, and other enterprises. Eventually Delancey residents will cross-train into three skills, one involving manual labor, another computer skills and the third requiring people skills.

Job assignments, academic progress and day to day disciplinary decisions are carried out by a cadre of senior Delancey residents who meet routinely with Silbert, who maintains final control and oversight.

"We teach them how to take advantage of opportunity. You just can't give opportunity without showing people how to use opportunity," Silbert explains.

Because nearly all residents arrive functionally illiterate, they begin a regimen of academics that will lead to a GED and perhaps onto a college degree from one of the colleges who partners with Delancey.

The training and education programs depend on one key philosophy – each one, teach one.

"If somebody reads at a sixth-grade level, we have them help teach someone reading at a third-grade level," Silbert said.

By teaching, each resident learn they have something to offer, something of value inside them.

"They teach respect, work ethics and social values to each other," Watkins said.

Delancey residents don't talk about the drugs or share war stories about their past. They care about their future.

After one year, residents can undertake dissipation. They share with others their life

experiences, accepting responsibility for the sometimes vicious, often heartless things they have done in the past.

“One of our goals is mutual restitution,” Miller said of balancing their past criminal lives, marked by the pain and sorrow they have inflicted on others, with their new lives of helping each other.

Graffiti on a chalkboard at Delancey’s Crossroads Café read: “Holding resentments is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”



As part of the program, each resident of Delancey Street must work in the foundation’s business, which is entirely self-sufficient.

Ultimate in sweat equity

Delancey Street has worked for nearly 30 years. In that time, more than 12,000 men and women have “graduated” from Delancey Street. Alumni include lawyers, law enforcement officials, teachers, firefighters and elected officials.

Hundreds of society’s outcasts and dropouts crowd into dorm rooms and live around the clock within a one block world. The six-day-a-week regimen of work, learning and teaching becomes a pattern that accomplishes for 80 percent of Delancey’s residents what they could not accomplish in their past lives, with or without the aid of social service or criminal justice systems.

Delancey Street receives no government funding – it is entirely self-sufficient. Nobody, including Silbert, receives a wage or salary, the

fruits of their labors being reinvested into their self-sufficient community.

The ultimate in sweat-equity, residents live in an elegant setting and dine on finely prepared cuisine. Almost everything in each Delancey resident’s life comes from within the program. Even the clothing on their backs, including the fashions worn by Silbert, come from community and business donations.

Named for a section of New York City’s Lower East Side where European immigrants arrived fresh off the boat at the turn of the century, Delancey Street has grown into five facilities throughout the country with more than 2,000 residents. This includes the 500 residents living in a four-story residential and commercial complex occupying a full city block two blocks from Pacific Bell Park along the Embarcadero waterfront in San Francisco.

The 325,000-square-foot facility was completed in 1991 (then appraised at \$14 million). Built almost entirely by Delancey residents, it includes a lap pool, an underground parking garage, a 150-seat movie screening room and one of San Francisco’s finest cafes.

Looking to the future

Judge Uldall and most Solano County judges agree there is a need for more programs like



Mimi Silbert’s Delancey Street program turns criminals into upstanding citizens.

Delancey Street.

“Until you get them off of drugs you won’t break their cycles of criminality,” Uldall says of

the criminal he sees almost every day in his court.

The president and cofounder of Delancey Street, Mimi Silbert, has spent nearly the last 30 years of her life working and living with men and women who most would consider society’s rejects.

Silbert is now seeing some new arrivals to Delancey Street who are third generation criminals.

“It’s so awful,” she said. “All they know is that the only way people can get anything is to get it illegally.”

Silbert, a criminologist and psychologist, has mobilized both her and Delancey Street’s energy, reputation and resources to try and change the criminal justice system for the next 30 years.

“We’ve been doing it one way,” Silbert said of the criminal justice current system. “It is an outdated and outmoded system of separation and punishment with some version of treatment within that and it’s time to say it is not working.

In the past 15 years in the United States, the number of drug-related arrests has more than doubled, from 708,400 in 1984 to 1,559,100 in 1998, according to Justice Department statistics. At the same time, the number of drug treatment programs in jails and prisons have been significantly reduced.

In January, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno toured Delancey Street. Reno’s visit reflects one of the more than 10,000 inquiries Delancey Street receives every year from others wanting to duplicate their model.

Gray Davis reappointed Silbert to a second term on the State Board of Corrections.

Gerald Miller helps oversee Delancey’s Institute for Social Renewal that hosts visitors from around the world, from Singapore to Poland and countless points in between, in developing models for addiction recovery programs.

Closer to home, Delancey started its own charter high school in 1998, the Life Learning Academy with 75 students that is based on Treasure Island.

Since 1996, Silbert has served as a special assistant to Mayor Willie Brown on reforming and overhauling San Francisco's juvenile justice program. She would now like to see the model arising from those efforts applied to each county in California.

The Delancey CIRCLE (the Coalition to Implement and Revitalize Communities, Lives, and the Environment) stresses developing working relationships between government agencies. Education, health, criminal justice and other agencies working together.

"They traditionally operate separately, with their own budgets and power structures," Silbert said. "CIRCLE tries to help them find ways of merging their recourses for improving their services."

Underlying the inroads into the local social infrastructure and the out reach into other communities through out the country and throughout the world is Silbert's guiding influence and family perspective.

"We must treat the problem by recognizing that, as a society, we have a lot invested in the criminal justice system. We must ask ourselves "what if these were my kids?" This is truly a family problem and we have to figure out what we can do to solve it."

