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Drug czar taps into Delancey Street

Clinton aide studies S.F. rehab program

By George Raine
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After 23 years of resisting involvement

with the federal government, Delancey Street creator Mimi Silbert has agreed to help the Clinton administration spread her unorthodox theory of drug rehabilitation.

President Clinton has vowed to give greater weight to treatment and rehabilitation, after 12 years in which Republican administrations emphasized only prevention, interdiction and incarceration. Last week Clinton's drug czar asked Silbert to let her landmark San Francisco rehabilitation and training program – a waterfront “school for scoundrels” as rigorous as any prison – become a model for the country.

There is nothing quite like Delancey Street – a spotless campus/ apartment house for people who have bottomed out after, on average, 12 years of drug addiction and four trips to prison. They spend an average four years rebuilding their lives, learning a trade and values.

“Even people who society considers completely irredeemable, the total losers, can be turned around and can re-enter society in the mainstream, and that we have proven,” Silbert told The Examiner.

Now Silbert will be advising the federal government, after 23 years without using a cent of taxpayer funding.

“It has finally gotten horrible enough that I feel like working closely with the government and trying to find a way to turn as many people around as possible,” she said. “Crime and violence have taken over everybody's life, but no one but Delancey Street has focused at this end of the continuum.”

Clinton foreshadowed a drug policy change during his campaign when he said he would include treatment in his health reform, and have insurance cover it, and in references to his brother, who was addicted to cocaine. This encouraged Silbert to join in the government's campaign after rejecting previous presidential requests.

Those administrations, she said, “isolated” elements of treatment – drug rehabilitation, job training, literacy.

Now Clinton and drug czar Lee Brown, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, are attracted to Silbert's strategy of rebuilding lives in a concentrated, intense atmosphere.

Hard-core users overhauled

It is this total overhaul of hard-core drug users and ex-convicts that makes Delancey Street unique. Traditionally, drug users and parolees are assisted with conventional counseling, but Delancey Street teaches people to be responsible and accountable.

As Brown, a new Clinton appointee, begins organizing his office, he is touring the nation looking for examples of successful rehabilitation programs. As a former police chief in Atlanta, Houston and New York, he knew of Silbert's work.

The first step: meetings with Brown to ascertain how the Delancey Street theory can be woven into a national drug strategy. “The generation of work that Mimi has done is now matched with the commitment and interest of the administration that believes in rehabilitation, and this could just make the difference in this war on drugs where we have not succeeded in the past,” said Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, who independently has promoted Delancey Street's theory to Attorney General Janet Reno.

Silbert began her career as a practitioner of the status quo. She worked as a prison psychologist, trained police officers, worked with probation officers, “believing it was our system.”

But after only a few years, she said, she found that traditional social-science thinking did not fit neatly with people who are not logical.

“One of the horrors of their lives is they are not guided by planned, rational thought,” she said, “and therefore things



EXAMINER/TOM DANE
Delancey Street's Mimi Silbert long resisted government ties, but gave in to help the Clinton administration.

we think would deter them don't. Prison would work for me. I have a lot to lose. These people have nothing to lose. I dreamed of college while they dreamed of San Quentin. That's the only place where they can be somebody."

What has become a San Francisco institution was forged in the theory, controversial in some quarters, that prison only adds to the hate men and women behind bars harbor, and the institutions are incubators for killers, said Silbert.

One other development has led to Silbert's new relationship with the Clinton administration: "In the past few years I've seen second or third generations of criminal families. That's the worst statistic of them all."

She added, "Here we teach those family values everybody yells about but for which there is no other way of inculcating into people who just don't have or will never have the kind of family those people want them to have. The place where they might learn the golden rule."

There is no staff at Delancey Street, named for the down-and-out street on New York's Lower East Side.

Senior residents teach new residents fundamentals of life they missed in disjointed families – how to dress, eat and speak properly, how to set a table, clean thins. They learn three marketable skills. The more than 11,000 Delancey Street graduates have all earned the equivalent of a high school diploma.

'As selective as Berkeley'

All of Delancey Street's residents apply for admittance, and most face the option of very long prison terms in the alternative. "We're just as selective as Berkley, Stanford and Harvard," said Silbert, who began the program with the late John Maher and who earned a joint doctorate in psychology and criminology at UC- Berkeley in the late-1960s. "We take only the bottom 1 or 2 percent, the same way they take only the top 1 or 2 percent."

Brown last week also selected Oakland's "drug court," a drug diversion program organized by Municipal Court Judge Jeffrey Tauber, as another drug program model.

Citing Delancey, Brown noted that hard-core criminals pose an especially onerous burden on America. "It has been increasingly clear that the drug epidemic that began in the late 1970s is becoming increasingly concentrated among the nation's heaviest of users and in the nations' poorest neighborhoods," he said.

Five hundred former users are at Delancey Street's San Francisco facility, where they help run a fashionable restaurant, Christmas tree lots, printing shop, moving business and more. Silbert, "and the Bank of America," also recently purchased the abandoned Midtown Hilton Hotel in

Los Angeles, where 500 more residents will be accommodated. Delancey Street also operates in New York, New Mexico and North Carolina.

Brannan Street restaurant

In San Francisco, one to the most successful parts of the Delancey Street operation is the 2-year old restaurant at Brannan Street and The Embarcadero. The other day a beefy waiter, unwittingly, demonstrated the trait of discipline that is the house rule:

"Better eat those scones," he said, moving a plate of high tea snacks under the nose of a visiting reporter. "Ms. Silbert wants her guests to eat.

Scones devoured, Silbert conducted the tour – to the busy kitchen, the bustling printing and desktop publishing shop, the body shop, the military-academy-clean apartments, and to the game room, the gathering place when a day of learning is done.

A large painting of an odd character with serious, penetrating brown eyes dominates a wall. His eyes fix on all who look at the painting.

Silbert laughed her infectious laugh. "They call him 'Mr. Guilt,'" she said. "And they have a lot to be guilty about."