

Massachusetts



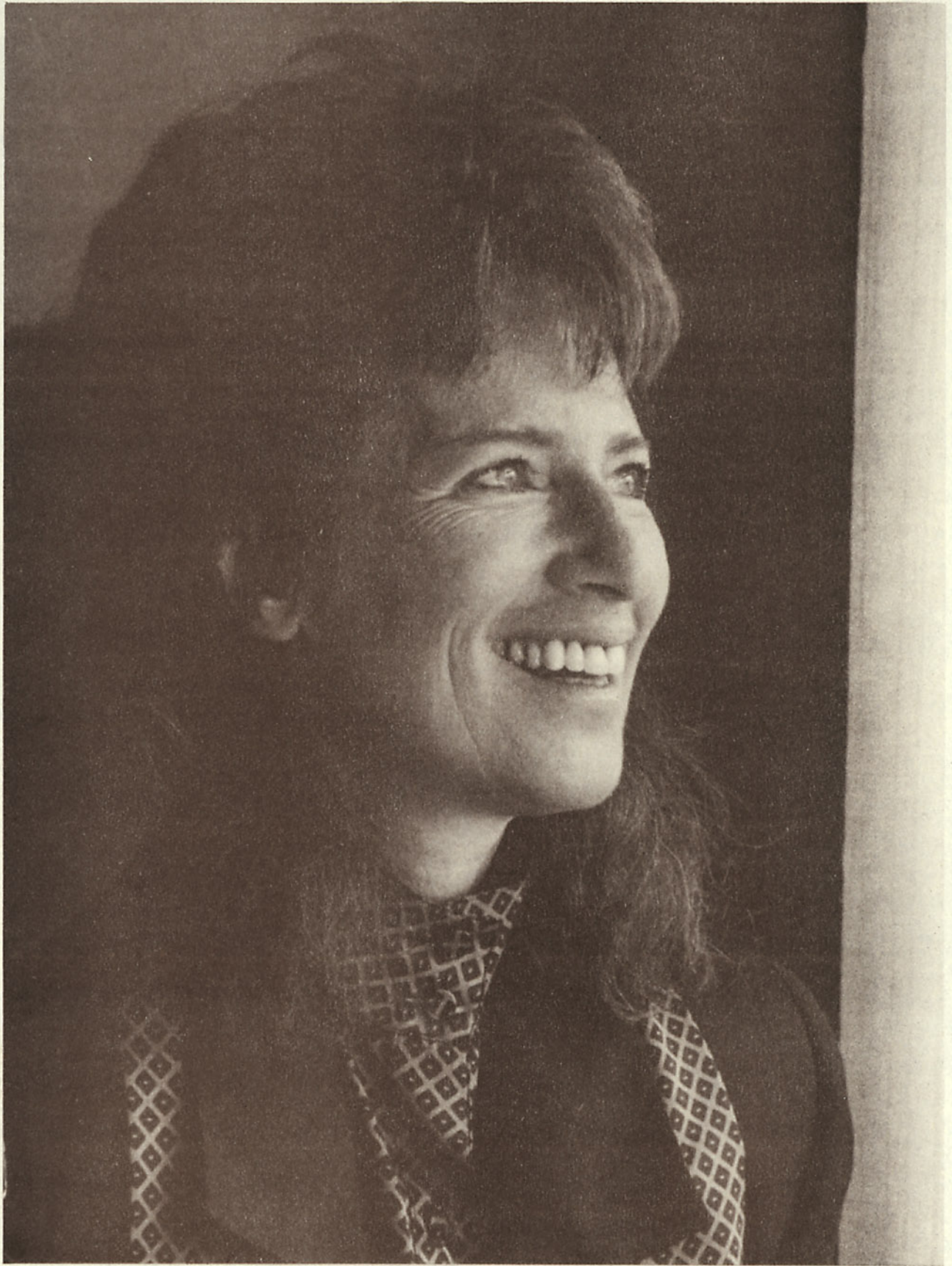
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Up & out

*The woman behind
"the best rehabilitation program in the world"*



■ **THREE U.S. PRESIDENTS** and numerous other public officials have honored Mimi Silbert '63 for the success of her Delancey Street Foundation. Silbert has also won scores of accolades from religious, civic, and law enforcement groups, and Berkeley, where she did her graduate work, saluted her in 1991 with an Alumni of the Year Award.

Help yourself

*Drug addicts and
ex-convicts at Delancey
Street work together to
rebuild their lives*

MIMI SILBERT '63 operates by analogy, role-play, chutzpah, and the seat of her pants. Also by means of whatever you get from a double doctorate (psychology and criminology) from Berkeley, and some 20 years as the sole professional staff member of the Delancey Street Foundation, a San Francisco-based program for ex-felons, drug addicts and prostitutes that psychiatrist Karl Menninger called "the best and most successful rehabilitation program in the world."

Delancey Street is a residential training program for extremely troubled people with, except for Silbert, no one but the troubled residents in charge. Some 80 percent of residents stay two to four years and go on to productive lives, at no cost to either themselves or the taxpayer. A result is that, as the ebullient Silbert remarked on a visit to campus last fall, "both political extremes walk through our organization and go – *YES! YES! THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!*"

Conservatives see Delancey Street raising the greater share of its operating expenses, as Silbert says, "the old-fashioned way, by going out and earning it." That is, by running businesses – auto repair, dry cleaning, printing, construction, restaurant, and so on – supplemented by donations, but not by grants or other forms of public funding. Liberals see Delancey Street providing vocational and "life skills" training in those same businesses, and in educational programs which again are entirely self-run. "So, starting with tutoring for high school equivalency, for example, if you read at the 10th grade level, you're tutoring someone who reads at the eighth grade level; that person's tutoring someone who reads at the sixth grade level – and literally down to the person who's barely reading, who's teaching somebody, 'This is a *B – buh!*'" The same applies to civics, literature, and art appreciation classes. All who "graduate" from Delancey Street do so with liberal educations and practice in attending the opera under their belts, as well as sales, manual labor, and office work experience.

Silbert's model and metaphor for Delancey

BY PATRICIA WRIGHT

Street is an immigrant family – a noisy, nudgy, extended, affectionate, productive household like her own eastern European Jewish family in Boston in the 1940s. In families like that, she says, everybody took care of the next littlest. Everybody worked but the baby – in Delancey Street terms, the last one in the door. And as soon as he or she was big enough, the baby started working too.

Among other things, this structure gave everybody a chance to feel important. It was the importance of feeling important that struck Silbert, back in the early seventies, in what she describes as something of a professional epiphany. She was teaching, doing research and therapy, and running a clinic staffed by her graduate students in Berkeley; this life, she noticed, led to people *thanking* her a lot. “I’d do some therapy, and the clients would say, ‘Oh, thank you, thank you.’ I’d do some training, and the police or whoever would say thank you, and then I’d go teach, and the students would say thank you. And I felt like – ‘God, I really am feeling like a good person!’”

“And then one day it struck me – who wants to be the person that has to say thank you all the time? Who wants to be just the receiver?” She “right away” put this perception to work in her clinic. Every client, to be accepted, had to be responsible for helping another client in some practical way. “So that one guy who was a teacher was tutoring a kind of ghetto kid from Oakland. And the kid from Oakland, who was a kind of be-bop artist, I had teaching this very withdrawn sort of child how to dance. And so on and on.”

Such work brought Silbert into contact with the late John Maher, a charismatic ex-convict who was just then laying the foundations of Delancey Street in San Francisco. Maher read about Silbert in the local press and realized her ideas were similar to his; plus, she had establishment ties and a proven ability to acquire and administer large federal grants. He contacted her for help in getting one for Delancey Street. Silbert declined. “Because federal money comes with

ties, number one; but number two, what’s *most* important is to teach self-reliance. And it isn’t a really good idea, you know, to be self-reliant with the left hand and totally funded with the right.” But she did become involved with Delancey Street, and the Maher-Silbert partnership became Delancey Street’s dual-carb ideological engine.

Maher, who died in 1988, was a



**“WE’VE TAKEN
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brilliant, streetwise Bronx slum kid who’d gotten control of an out-of-whack life through Synanon, a radical spin-off of Alcoholics Anonymous for drug addicts. He brought to Delancey Street many of the precepts of the parent and grandparent organizations – AA’s self-help ethic, Synanon’s ideal of communal living for recovering addicts – but on a neighborhood model. Rather than a dispersed group of alcoholics coming together for meetings, or a collective of addicts attempting to create a self-sufficient enclave, Delancey Street

would be a residential program imbedded in the wider community – not only through its businesses, but through its residents’ ambition to assimilate. “We’re Jewish, they’re Amish,” Maher said of the difference between his organization and Synanon. The name Delancey Street memorializes an immigrant neighborhood on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The first stage in its process is called “immigration.”

What Silbert added to Maher’s concept, besides an additional blast of charisma and energy, was a vision of neighborhood through the prism of family. Her own had been notably warm, happy, and successful in sending her off into the world persuaded she could conquer it. When she realized the impracticality of her English major’s dream of aiding troubled youth through innovative literature classes – high school, she perceived, was not set up that way – she polevaulted into graduate school at Berkeley, went through master’s and Ph.D. programs in two subjects in five years, and began to publish, speak, schmooze, and make a name for herself as a psychologist and criminologist. For a highly intelligent child of the sixties who’s spent her life among hardened criminals, Silbert has a surprisingly positive outlook, and it has powered the progress of Delancey Street, of which she became executive director in 1976 and is now president, chairman of the board, and CEO, not to mention developer of the \$30 million building the Foundation completed for itself on San Francisco’s waterfront in 1989.

“We really do function like a family,” says Silbert, a compact and animated brunette with windmill arms, a grin that continually threatens to erupt through her sentences, and absolutely no fear of being loud. “Our family just happens to be *huge*” – Delancey Street has about 800 residents nationwide, about half of them in San Francisco – “and it just *happens*” – there’s the grin – “that the members are ex-felons!”

Silbert says Delancey Street residents have been in prison an average

of four times, drug-addicted an average of 12 years, and are generally illiterate as well as unskilled. "They've never held a job, even an unskilled job, as long as six months, so they not only don't have any skills, they don't have any *habits*." They're generally "many generations into poverty, and welfare, and being stuck and trapped."

They're generally very angry. "I tend to *charge*," says Silbert; "I tend to charge forward and give people hugs. And you ought to see them the first time; it's like" – she twists her head and shoulders in a show of intolerable aversion – "everything they have, you know, not to just whack me *off*, and say – 'HEY! NO ONE TOUCHES ME.'"

"They're paranoid, you see; no one touches them."

These unlikely candidates are reformed, Silbert says, by the same principles her own parents used: unwavering support, opportunity, responsibility, and discipline. She doesn't romanticize the residents, especially new ones. She knows perfectly well, she says, that they arrive with every intention of breaking the promise that gets them in, which is to stay on, non-violent and drug-free, for two years. "I say to them, I *understand* that you don't intend to keep your promise! YOU'VE NEVER KEPT A PROMISE IN YOUR LIFE! And I understand that, in fact, you

think you're going to manipulate me, and all of us; and our job is to out-manipulate you!

"And we're *better* at it than you are!"

It seems she is; or rather that Delancey Street is. One of the reasons for the satellite programs in Los Angeles, New Mexico, North Carolina, and New York was to demonstrate that what works is not Silbert's or Maher's

charisma, but the program they developed. The debt to AA and Synanon notwithstanding, Silbert thinks it works because it's a training model. "We stay away entirely away from that model that something's the matter with you," she says. "The *sickness* model." The word "therapy" is not used. The substantial emotional work that residents are encouraged to

do is confined to evening and weekend group sessions. During working hours, the emphasis is on what Silbert calls Acting As If. "Acting as if you know what you're doing! Acting as if you're comfortable in your suit. Acting as if you care about other people."

Silbert is not surprised to be asked if Delancey Street could save America and not shy about answering. "Well, I believe it could," she says. "I believe all we've done is taken American values – the way they used to be! – and we've used them, and with the toughest part of the population. And if it can work with the toughest part of the population, it can certainly work with the rest of us.

"Because it simply *works!* On plain, old-fashioned – *values!* That's why it's named Delancey Street and not some meaningful therapy name like 'Out of the Ashes' – or '*Bridge Over Troubled Waters!*' The imagery is a neighborhood.

"It's just that we've organized our neighborhood. But it seems to me every other neighborhood ought to start organizing itself along similar lines." ■

Spellbinder on campus



THE 30 UNDERGRADUATES in Ralph Whitehead's Social Reporting class were impressed with Mimi Silbert's description of her work at the Delancey Street Foundation. "Spellbound" is the word Whitehead uses. But not to the point of collapse of the critical faculties he's been encouraging in them.

Whitehead's students listened carefully to Silbert's argument for self-help among ex-convicts and drug-users, he says, then "kicked its tires and slammed its doors" awhile during the question-and-answer period. (Sample question: What happens if a Delancey Street resident goes back on drugs? Sample answer: They're out.) "It's to their credit that they knew where the tires and doors were," says Whitehead, an associate professor of journalism, "and it's to her credit that the tires and doors hold up to the treatment."

This sort of lively exchange is just what the Eleanor Bateman distinguished visitors program is supposed to foster, according to Larry Moneta, an associate director of the housing services office, which administers the three-year-old program. Moneta estimates that 250 students had a chance to talk with Silbert during her three-day visit to campus in October. (Similar numbers met civil rights activist Unita Blackwell '83 MRP last winter, and the inaugural visitor, broadcaster Gerry Brooks '74, in April of 1990. Bateman visitors – all alumni so far – stay in the Bateman suite in Van Meter dormitory, from which Silbert, at least, did not "*MOVE - unless somebody comes and TAKES ME BY THE HAND - UMass has gotten HUUUUUUGGGGE!*")

Silbert's bravura personality proved to be a persuasive vehicle for her ideas, even where those ideas might have been worrisome. Graduate student Wilfred Lemire thinks his classmates in a counseling practicum could share Silbert's enthusiasm for a program that hires no counselors because they were "just so taken with the aura she presents." Silbert's visit doesn't have them "looking over our shoulders," says Lemire. It just has them "thinking more about the whole idea of peers taking responsibility."