

HEMISPHERES

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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HELPING OTHERS HELP THEMSELVES: AN INTERVIEW WITH MIMI SILBERT

Combining an incredible mix of hard practicality and obtainable idealism, Mimi Silbert is giving hope and life to society's outcasts. Without government funding or a single incident of violence, she has rescued over 11,000 people.

Dr. Mimi Silbert is passionate about injustice. Criminal offenders and drug addicts go to prison and come out unchanged, with no skills and no hope. "And they still don't know the first thing about being a human being. They need to learn how to say 'please' and 'thank you,'" says the 5-foot dynamo.

For 24 years, Dr. Silbert, with doctoral degrees in psychology and criminology from the University of California-Berkeley, has given hope and life to outcasts. The average person who comes to Delancey Street, the rehabilitation residency facility she co-founded, has been jailed four times, drug addicted 12 years, and is illiterate. To enter, a new resident promises to remain nonviolent and drug-free for two years.

Dr. Silbert is a recognized national expert in criminal justice. She has received four honorary doctorates and numerous awards and commendations, including the Mahatma Ghandi Humanitarian Award, the Jewish National Fund's Tree of Life Award, and the Pope John XXIII Award, to name a few. San Francisco mayors have declared Mimi Silbert days.

Dr. Silbert, who serves as president, chairman of the board, and CEO of the Delancey Street Foundation, is sustained by her belief that everyone wants to be somebody. Everyone is a giver and a receiver at Delancey Street, which functions as an extended family governed by an "each one teach one" principle, where taking care of each other replaces street wisdom. In resident-directed training schools, ex-felons,



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drug abusers, and the homeless learn to handle power and move up in the organization.

A truly remarkable culmination of Delancey Street's self-help credo is the new home they built in San Francisco: a three-story, 350,000-square foot, 177-unit complex, complete with heated pool, screening room, auditorium, Mediterranean-style courtyard, restaurant, and retail store spaces. Silbert has said it is appropriate that the project was made possible by help from the construction trades and a \$10 million unsecured loan from the Bank of America. "We have a saying, which is to 'act as if,'" she says. "We say if you walk

around saying 'please' and 'thank you,' you will become a person who talks that way. We walked around the building site acting as if we could pull down buildings and raise girders. Pretty soon we began to believe it ourselves."

Without any government funding and without a single incident of violence, Delancey Street has rescued over 11,000 addicts and criminals.

Nationally, it has graduated lawyers, truck drivers, salespeople, realtors, and mechanics from five centers. A San Francisco supervisor, housing commissioner, deputy coroner, and deputy sheriff are among its successes.

Q: What's your earliest memory of injustice?

A: I remember eating dinner listening to the news on a radio. In those days, small crimes were announced: an old lady was hit over the head and her purse was stolen. My father would say in one breath, "Imagine that young kids could →

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do such a thing," and in the next breath, he would say, "Imagine those children, the lives they must not have and how horrible things are for them." So from an early age, I heard both sides.

Q: *Where did Delancey Street get its name?*

A: It's a street in New York where immigrants lived in extended families, pooled their resources, and worked hard to move up in society. In fact, we did what we were supposed to. When I was 12, we got ourselves out of our ghetto flat in Boston and into a little house and slowly did the American Dream.

Twenty-five years later, at Delancey Street, we have not strayed from the purity of that model, which relies on an old-fashioned belief that when you care for someone else you grow. Alone, my grandparents had nothing, but we all pooled together financially and emotionally.

That's how we started Delancey Street. The few of us who could work earned a salary and supported others. Someone who knew how to cook, cooked, and that was equally important.

Q: *How do you get the residents, who grew up in second- and third-generation families mired in poverty, drug abuse, and crime, to begin to understand such family values?*

A: We started out with the idea that we would not be funded. We have gone after some specific money to buy a truck to start our moving company, for example, but we wanted to teach our residents to earn money so that everything the organization achieved, the residents would know it was they who achieved it.

We fell into our first enterprise—construction—by accident. We had a girl we did not want returning to public school. We went to the private schools and offered work for her tuition. We didn't want to ask for a free scholarship because she had flunked out of school and had been a prostitute and a thief. But we thought she would do great because we provide a lot of discipline, support, and tutoring. One school agreed. They asked us to paint the school inside and out and to build a kindergym.

The man in the paint store told us, 'You roll the roller up; you roll the roller down.' I bought a *Sunset* magazine and I read it out loud because I was the intellectual. Some people could interpret what I read, and they were good with their hands. So we built this thing with a slide and swings. We sanded. It was the smoothest, most beautiful thing you've ever seen. Except when you climbed up to go on the slide, instead of going down, ours shot off into the air.

We'd obviously attached something upside down. We had to take it apart

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six times. It does not matter how many mistakes you make, it matters that you fix them.

Q: *You bought a 40-room mansion in San Francisco's Pacific Heights as a first home for Delancey Street. How did you do this?*

A: It had been a Russian consulate, and even in the early 1970s no one lived in such a house. It was run down and stayed on the market for 3½ years until we bought it for \$50,000. Needless to say, the neighbors were not thrilled that 100 large, dark, violent felons were moving into the *prettiest* house on the top of the *highest* hill in Pacific Heights.

Neighbors always worry that crime will go up and property values will go down. We made sure to reverse it—property values went up and crime went down. We applied our early brilliant kindergym experience to redoing the

building. Before crime patrols existed, we patrolled the neighborhood.

We are a very strict and structured organization. We went to each neighbor and volunteered our services. We said we want an opportunity to prove we will be the best neighbors.

Q: *Dr. Karl Menninger has said, "Delancey Street is an incredible mix of hard practicality and idealism. It is the most successful program I have studied in the world." Why do you think Delancey Street has been so successful?*

A: We can't solve social problems in a bureaucratic way, as if a social problem were a simple welfare, crime, literacy, or skills problem. When the government thinks about replicating our model, it loses sight of what makes it work: common sense and not a lot of abstract theories. We deal with the *whole* person, and instead of getting a healthy staff to bend down and help the poor, sick, crazy, nasty people, we take the ultimate risk—on the people *themselves*, who are the problem, to become *themselves*, the solution. Power comes through action and so does the way you feel about yourself. Some things you have to earn for yourself.

Q: *When someone comes to Delancey Street, do they know what to expect?*

A: They do and they don't. One myth about this population is that they live in a logical world, but they don't understand consequences. We have about 25 percent homeless and 75 percent from criminal justice. To enter, you either write to ask to come, or you come and sit on our bench. No matter when you arrive, two of our residents who are doing interviews are summoned.

You tell your story. We interrupt. We try to get you to stop blaming everyone. If you are hung up on your mother, we say, 'If your mother controls your life and you want your life to be different, why don't you send your mother here and we'll work with her because obviously you have nothing to do with your own life.' We try to get the person to admit that *they* did not make me pull the trigger, *they* did not make me rip the purse from the old lady. Yes, *I* did it. →

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Q: *I understand residents work their way up.*

A: Most are con artists, but there is nothing here to con. You are assigned to a dorm. Your dorm head, someone who has been here a month or so, gives you all the rules: get up in the morning, make your bed, do your dorm duties, take a shower.

The new resident is put into a group called a minion—we try to be humorous and make up words—that teaches responsibility. We say, 'One little tiny piece of you wants to change or you wouldn't have come here, so it's up to the 10 of you to help each other turn that little thing of hope into a real hope.'

Anytime one does anything wrong, we call them together. We say, 'Why did you steal that T-shirt when we gave you T-shirts anyway?' We say to the one who knew, 'You don't give a damn. You want to let this guy go down because of one T-shirt?' Since our only punishment is doing dishes, it's not like sending someone back to prison. We teach people that they can fix their mistakes instead of living with secrecy and guilt.

At first, new residents clean and serve meals. A lot of people are kicking drugs then. They lean on their brooms until they get a little sturdier. The crew boss tries to get them to work together. 'He got the good broom and I got the broom that's missing the things in it. That's why my area never gets cleaned.' They live a life of looking for someone to blame.

Q: *What type of skills training takes place at Delancey Street?*

A: Everybody gets trained in one physical labor skill, one people-to-people job (waitperson or sales), and paper pushing (accounting, bookkeeping, computers), then majors in one area and goes as high up as possible. Every department is run by a resident.

A regular work day is from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., only we pause a lot. I say we live life with a tape recorder. Every half-hour we press the pause button. We might say to you, 'If you just


mouthed off that way to your boss, you'd be fired. I just want you to understand that's not how life goes. You take your feelings and your injustices and you stuff them.'

We break the pauses up. In the morning, a resident conducts a seminar with a vocabulary word and a concept. It might be a quote from Emerson that they discuss. Everybody checks everybody else all day with the vocabulary word. At noon we talk about current events or review books. Some days we practice setting a table, dressing, tying a tie. We dress for dinner where we all sit and chat. We're talking about people who mostly never in their lives sat down at a family table for dinner.

At night, at endless classes, everyone is tutored. Someone who reads at a 10th-grade level teaches someone who reads at an eighth-grade level who teaches someone who reads at a fourth-grade level. Everyone reaches a high school equivalency. The average stay here is four years, so we have a liberal arts curriculum with literature, art, music. Everybody goes to museums, the symphony, jazz performances. Twice a week, we get together in groups to release stuffed emotions. We try to laugh at ourselves constantly.

Q: *What do you see as the challenge now?*

A: Our biggest issue now is to replicate this model. I want to prove the process runs the model. Residents are in charge of each function at our four other centers. They do it for a year, then graduate. Someone else does it for a year, then graduates, so it is not the individual doing it. You need a strong, visionary, committed lunatic to dedicate a life to initiate something. To continue, Delancey Street must be bigger than I am. I think we're succeeding. We've started a little training institute. People come from all over the world to learn the process. There's something for the Aborigines in New Zealand and something for kids in Amherst, Massachusetts. It's the oddest mix of people.

In Canada, two auto mechanics read about us. We showed them it isn't enough to teach a job skill to an angry person with antisocial values who doesn't know how to listen to authority. They will self-destruct in a job. In time they understood. They started out as auto mechanics, and they ended up running a little version of Delancey Street. I believe we have a process that replicates itself. 

DELANCEY STREET FOUNDATION

Basic Facts

Headquarters Address:	600 Embarcadero San Francisco CA 94107
Other Facilities:	Los Angeles CA; Brewster NY; Greensboro NC; San Juan Pueblo NM
In Existence:	25 Years
Graduated:	11,000 People now successful citizens
Cost to Client or Taxpayer:	\$0
President/CEO:	Mimi Halper Silbert, Ph.D.
Phone Numbers for Intake:	(415) 512-5150 (415) 512-5187
Phone Number for Replication:	(415) 512-5148
Phone No. to use our Moving Co: (National, Home, Commercial Moves)	(415) 512-5110
Phone Number to Make Reservations at our Highly Reviewed Restaurant:	(415) 512-5179
Phone Numbers to make Donations:	(415) 512-5190 (415) 512-5108