

MIMI'S

AT DELANCEY STREET, IT'S FAITH THAT

The men and women of the Delancey Street Foundation look like accountants and medical technicians and paralegals and dentists and managers in corporate sales. They are well put together; everything matches — the tie goes with the suit, the shirt with the tie; the women's shoes and bags are always complementary, if not matching, and their suits are straightforward, yet pretty. These clean-cut, well-dressed people all get up at eight every weekday morning and head off to breakfast and a full day's work. Taken as a whole, they are friendly and helpful. But underneath the men's carefully pressed business suits there are often snakes and swords, Vikings and skulls, lightning bolts, swastikas, crosses, devils and naked girls, tattoos that cover nearly all available flesh and that are the artistic heritage of years spent in prison — in Folsom and San Quentin, in the county jail, in juvenile detention facilities, for murder, for armed robbery, for drug-trafficking. And on the back of a woman's hand, you can occasionally find the three-dotted cross of the Mexican Mafia, one of the four major race-based gangs (the others are the Black Guerrillas, the Aryan Brotherhood and Nuestra Familia) that unofficially run California's prison system. These are no average mid-level managers: These people were hard-core rejects, antisocial nobodies, killers, whores, junkies, pimps, runners. In "liberal-speak," they are "society's disadvantaged."

But there is no such thing as "liberal-speak" for Mimi Silbert, president and co-founder of Delancey Street, a 25-year-old San Francisco-based rehabilitation center for hard-core cases. Silbert despises politically correct language and never uses euphemisms. The institution she created is considered one of the world's most successful at criminal rehabilitation, although Silbert is not interested in swinging those kinds of laurels. "When they come in, these people are nasty, bad, filthy, rotten assholes, and I'm not kidding," she says. "But my assumption is to believe in people who don't believe in themselves." She



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ

MISSION

WORKS

BY AMY WILENTZ



sounds like a goody-goody, and she is. She just happens to be a Pollyanna who can curse. "Not 'substance abuser,'" she says contemptuously. "Dope fiend."

Delancey Street has excellent numbers. More than 10,000 hard-core cases have "graduated" after participating in the two-year program. The rate of recidivism among Delancey Street graduates is approximately zero, though more than 20 percent of those admitted leave before they have finished their initial two-year "commitment." (More than 60 percent come straight out of the criminal justice system, most on plea bargains, others on the recommendation of parole and probation officers. About 30 percent come off the street on their own, escaping homelessness, penny prostitution, and drug addiction.) No one who has finished the program has ever gone on to commit a serious crime. There have never been any arrests made at Delancey Street, despite the fact that the average resident has been a drug addict for at least ten years, and has been imprisoned four times. Some residents come to like Delancey Street so much they remain there for decades. This family never throws you out if you want to remain and can pull your own weight. Indeed, most residents who make it through the commitment period stay on at least two more years before testing the real-world waters, because even if you've completed the program to the satisfaction of management (which is made up exclusively of Delancey Street residents), you can't graduate until you have a bank account, a job and a new place to live. You must be able to read, and have your high-school equivalency. You must also feel ready

MIMI SILBERT ARRIVES IN THE DELANCEY STREET RESTAURANT KITCHEN AFTER THE LUNCH CROWD LEAVES. THE ENTIRE KITCHEN STAFF PARTICIPATES IN THE FOUNDATION'S PROGRAM. SHE USUALLY DISCUSSES HOW LUNCH WENT, WHAT WAS GOOD AND WHAT COULD IMPROVE.

DEALS WITH MEALS

In addition to her effectiveness at starting Delancey Street, and building it into one of the most effective rehabilitation programs in the world, Mimi Silbert is no slouch when it comes to political prowess, either.

Her skills are appreciated by a round of unlikely allies, from Mayor Willie Brown, whom she helped get elected, to the San Francisco Giants, whose new ballpark she has supported.

"Yes, I supported (the ballpark initiative)," she allowed, in a recent chat with Examiner editors at the Delancey Street Restaurant. "I also served — and still do — as an intermediary for our little neighborhood. I kept them together at this table (her presiding round table at the restaurant) initially. (The Giants) made a big presentation, with charts and everything in the room back there, discussing the concerns of the neighborhood and the way the Giants were willing to make things right. I met with the owners reps of all the neighborhood buildings. A lot of it was just dealing with miscommunications ... Having spent my whole life as a communicator, I could do that."

Silbert quickly adds that she "also understood the concerns of the residential neighborhoods. I believe fully that the Giants in all good faith wanted to address those concerns. I know all the people: Larry (Baer), Peter (Magowan) Rudy (Nothenberg, of Mayor Brown's brain trust) ...

"They had their victory party here," she recalls. "Peter was unbelievably generous to bring me on the stage as a member of the victory team. He sent me a bunch of dates to throw out the first ball. Very generous, considering the number of people involved in the ballpark fight. They're honestly looking to be good neighbors. The Giants pretty much need our support because we're a big neighborhood and we're pretty vocal.

She's firmly in the camp of the new mayor, with whom she has a relationship that spans decades.

"In truth, Willie Brown has been a member of the Delancey Street family for just about the whole time it's been in existence, and in some ways that weren't going to do him any good — just because he liked it. He fights and stands for a lot of things I believe in. The critical first step to doing anything is getting people to hope, get excited and believe. That's what we do. I have not seen this kind of hope in San Francisco since George Moscone." Nevertheless, she cautions against mayoral hubris.

"There's a burden on anyone who gets someone's hopes up — it becomes more critical to make change happen. I liken what's going on in our city to residents coming into Delancey Street. First, they don't believe they can change. All of a sudden, change becomes possible. They can feel it. It's a tangible thing. That's an unbelievable burden on you as the person who gets those hopes up."

Other pals are old friends, too.

"Johnny Burton, he's family to Delancey Street, like Dianne Feinstein (whose son-in-law, Rick Moriano, is a Delancey Street graduate). They love Delancey Street because it works. We have disparate friends. George Schultz. To them all, the friendship is based on not that we have some power or strength, it's that Delancey Street provides an open, honest, earnest environment for people who can't relax in other places."

"Here they just get to come and hang out with the residents ... and ME!," she laughs. "People as different as Denise Hale, Jane Fonda, Robert Redford and Cesar Chavez. They all like to come."

for the challenge of the outside world. When the residence is not overpopulated, the policy is to admit anyone who is not a repeat sex offender ("Someone who did it is OK (for possible admission," says Silbert, "but not someone who *does* it") nor a person in clear need of professional psychiatric help. People about to be sentenced must write and request admission; they are then interviewed by a committee of Delancey Street residents. If they are given a letter of "tentative acceptance," they may submit it to the judge at sentencing. Silbert says: "To get yourself here, you have to just take a little initiative; there has to be just a teeny little piece of the person that wants to change. Then we don't care about the huge mass surrounding it that believes it's all b.s."

The initial days at Delancey Street are a shock for most new residents. A newcomer enters the reception area and sits down on The Bench — a hard, unupholstered, Puritan-looking love seat. After an interview and acceptance, new residents begin a maintenance program, performing janitorial duties. They're given five sets of clothing: three work outfits; a leisure ensemble, and one more formal set of clothes for dinner time and outings into the world. They're assigned a "barber," or big brother or sister, who is responsible for their behavior and gives them haircuts (prison lingo for a dressing-down). They're assigned to a minyan, (in Jewish religion, the minimum of ten men who must be present for prayers to be said in synagogue), a single sex group of 10 or 12 people, and to a tribe, a larger group. Minyan leaders are in charge of the everyday life of the group: who does what job, what phone calls can be received, when you may visit your family, when you're ready to move out of maintenance, what kind of jobs to recommend you for and so on. Your tribe, a co-ed group, is responsible for the social and psychological welfare of the group. Tribe games — screaming rap sessions — are played regularly and obsessively by all the groups. You graduate from eight-person dorms to one-roomer-person roommate suites, and, eventually, from maintenance to management and staff. After your second year, you do a "dissipation" (wordplay on dis-

sertation) during which you publicly explain your past and your past behavior and express your hopes and intentions for the future. Along the way, your co-residents never get off your back, never leave you alone, always criticizing you, prodding you and butting in to your business.

Delancey Street's idiosyncrasies derive from Silbert's own personal style and her philosophical and political beliefs. The program is based on the extended family, with each Delancey resident taking responsibility for the behavior of the others. ("It's a cross between an extended family and a university," Silbert says. In fact, Delancey Street became a degree-granting institution six months ago, accredited by Golden Gate University.) There are very few layers of authority; every step you make up the ladder of success at Delancey Street is earned on the job. A resident who comes in after five years of solitary on Death Row can eventually rise to the top ranks of Delancey Street management.

"We live the way poor families live, by working," Silbert says. "We are an extended family that is rooted in the community. We are not *therapeutic*, we do not provide services for our people. We have no program model and no medical model. We insist on living in 19th century America. We work, and we expand. We are entrepreneurs. We have no administrative overhead; no money goes to public relations, nothing to fund-raising. Every penny goes into the lives of the residents: to feeding, clothing, housing, training and education. We are immigrants into the American mainstream."

Delancey Street receives no federal, state or municipal funding. It's entirely self-supporting, and has no staff other than residents. No staff means no payroll; no one, including Silbert, receives a salary, and, despite rumors to the contrary, all profits made by Delancey Street businesses — including moving and trucking; picture-framing; rollerblade rentals; screenings of motion-picture dailies for the industry (the screening room was donated by Francis Ford Coppola and modeled on Robert Redford's screening room at Sundance); Christmas tree sales; a successful restau-



MIMI SILBERT CONDUCTS A MEETING OF 'TRIBE LEADERS,' PEOPLE IN CHARGE OF A GROUP OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE DELANCEY STREET PROGRAM. TRIBE LEADERS ACT AS MENTORS TO THE GROUP AND DISCUSS PROBLEMS PARTICIPANTS ARE FACING.

rant, where high-profile Bay Area political figures like Democratic Assemblyman John Burton may be frequently seen; a transport business for the elderly and handicapped, all manned and managed exclusively by Delancey Street people — are plowed back into the institution. The businesses net about \$7 million per year, and the operating budget nationwide — Delancey has branches in L.A., New Mexico, New York state, and North Carolina — is \$10 million. Three million dollars a year are donated in services and products — in clothing, material, furniture, food, artworks, books, cosmetics, anything it takes for people to live life — and small, unsolicited contributions.

"After 25 years, we have a lot of friends who are very good to us, and very generous," Silbert says. "We've never taken a single penny from the American taxpayer, who pays a f----- fortune for all the prisons everywhere, and gets nothing in return, except tougher criminals."

Since its inception 25 years ago, Silbert's energy and character have fueled Delancey Street. Escaping the easy, middle-class life for which her stable, bourgeois background could have prepared her, she seized

on those things in her heritage — the Eastern European refugee's endurance, the early Zionist's pioneer spirit, the fresh immigrant's empathetic ability — that equipped her singularly for a job of rescue and rehabilitation. And she put everything into Delancey Street from the start: She lived among her people, alongside the con men and murderers. Her children lived there. Her personal life was there: Her marriage was destroyed by Delancey Street and the greatest love affair of her life was with John Maher, the man with whom she founded it, who was himself an ex-con and former Synanon man.

Together, Silbert and Maher kept Delancey going — saving souls, pulling people out of mud and blood and a wild assortment of sordid fates — until he, too, fell apart and went under. This was one soul she could not save. In the end, the institution she created proved more reliable than the individual with whom she had created it. After their relationship collapsed, she became one of the people rescued by Delancey Street. After she had given it so much, it gave back.

To this day, Silbert is still at Delancey Street's swirling center: in the middle of raucous meetings

where new rooming situations and new job responsibilities, decided upon by Silbert and a committee of residents, are doled out to clamorous applause or groans of disappointment; listening sympathetically at "dissipations;" zipping through the spacious club room upstairs, where men — and sometimes a few women — play pool and guitar and cards and sit around in small groups; or simply being the target all day of all the complaints, praise, bad news and good tidings the place can generate.

Unlike the physically imposing residents who surround her, Silbert is unremarkable, except for her slight size, out-of-control chestnut hair, and green-blue eyes. Still, she dominates every encounter. Walking with Silbert around Delancey Street premises, you feel as if you're accompanying a kind of savior. Grown men with sinewy bodies sculpted by hard times, and skinny, snaggle-toothed women who look like they just got run over say, "Hi, Mimi," in excited, timid teenage voices filled with a mixture of worship and fear. Big men with scars and broken teeth and gleaming biceps loom over her protectively, nodding at her every word, laughing at her every joke. Tough, stubbled guys ap-

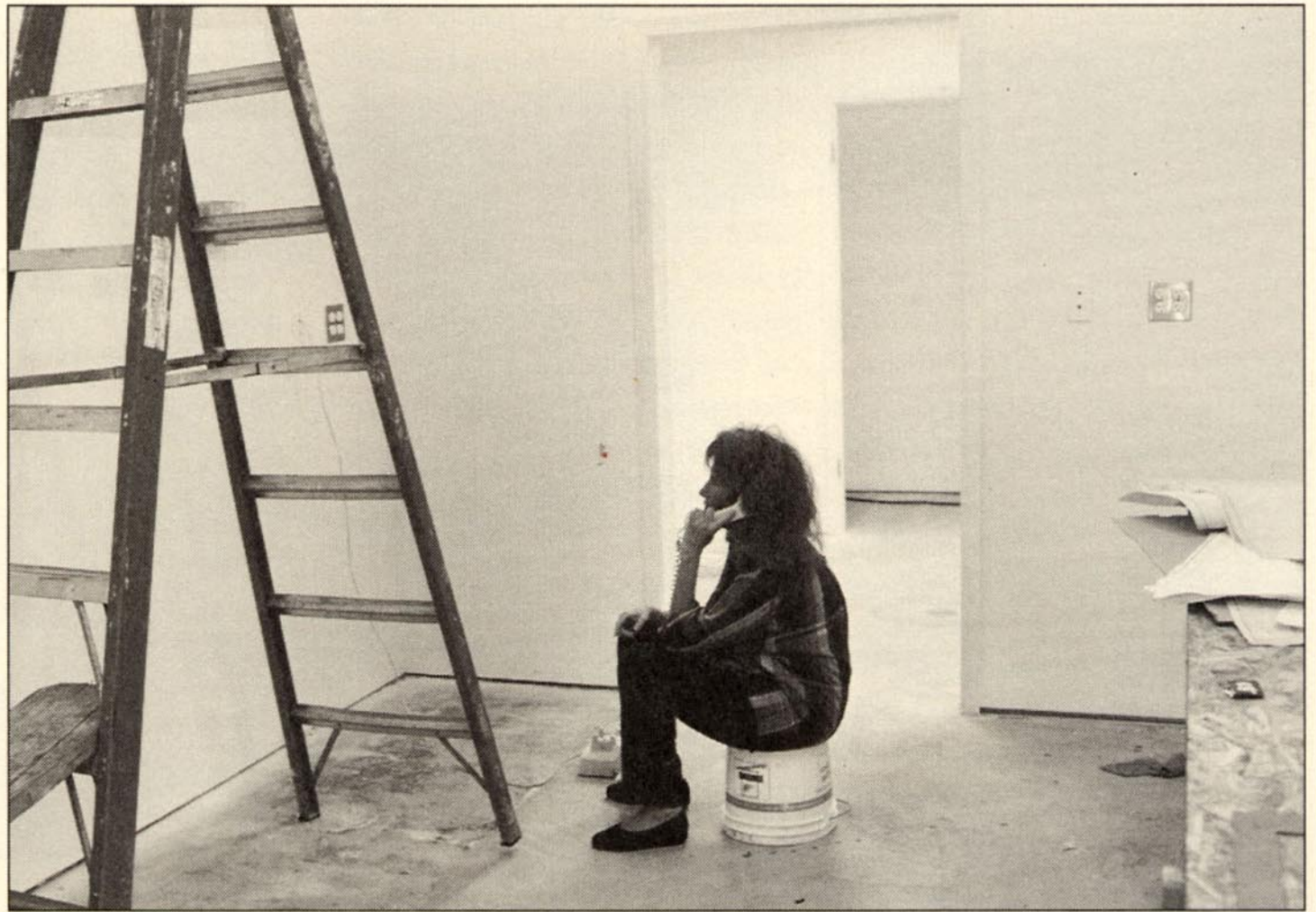
proach her with shy diffidence. A rangy, chewed-up woman with a cigarette tipped from her lips beams when Silbert showers her with approval. Silbert greets everyone with a chirrupy "Hi," often accompanied by a first name, although she admits she doesn't know the names of all 500 residents.

Silbert doesn't get out much. The Delancey Street Restaurant is one of her main venues for contact with the outside world. Except for her water bed, a relic of the 1960s, the atmosphere she has created in her apartment and in her office — both inside the Delancey Street compound — is bland. Her desk is the desk of any manager: two jewel kaleidoscopes, a plush Minnie Mouse cheerleader doll, a photograph of her twin sons at their Bar Mitzvah, a photograph of her parents as a young couple and folders full of mail.

Her apartment is similarly impersonal — decorated à la Miami condo, in pastel mauves and greens, with few personal touches. Her life and identity are vested in her work, to which she is obsessively, single-mindedly, devoted.

The Delancey Street Restaurant is not the Delancey Street dining room. The dining room is for residents; the restaurant is for the public. It's a popular San Francisco hangout, not too expensive, not cheap, luring liberal politicians and people from the surrounding multimedia industry. (*Wired* magazine has its offices nearby.) Silbert has a big round table in the middle of the room where she has meetings and holds forth for the outside world. (Most of her holding forth before Delancey Street residents is done in what's known as The Vatican, a comfortable family room in the complex.) A big teacup full of strong tea is brought to her immediately — one seems to be waiting for her wherever she goes. Delancey Street residents dressed as waiters in maroon bow ties, white shirts and black pants flit around the big rose and green dining room.

Silbert examines the menu closely (she provides and tests all the recipes); she chooses a little of this and a little of that; some hors d'oeuvres — chicken satay and pastry pockets called *alejandrinos*; a taste of the new pasta; half a hamburger to see if the new meat supplier is any good; no wine or alcohol, because she believes in abiding by Delancey Street sobriety rules; and then vanilla ice cream with Delancey Street hot fudge sauce, to show off the home-made syrup to her guests. Although she is petite and slender, she has an enormous, eclectic appetite, and she is obsessed with every detail of the menu. Like an old-fashioned captain of industry, she's made her mark on every last little thing the foundation does, from the construction of the Delancey Street complex and the details of the foundation's financial spreadsheets down to the hot-fudge sauce and the upgrading of the used bus Delancey Street has just bought for its residents' field trips.



AT THE SITE OF THE NEW CAFE, SILBERT TAKES TIME OUT FOR A PHONE CALL



SILBERT'S NEWEST VENTURE IS ADDING A CAFE TO THE DELANCEY STREET SITE ON THE EMBACADERO. ALTHOUGH SHE ASKS ADVICE FROM BUILDING PROFESSIONALS, SILBERT AND THE PARTICIPANTS LEARN AS THEY WORK. ABOVE, SHE WORKS WITH A GRADUATE OF THE PROGRAM, JOHN AMMIRATO, (RIGHT) AND A CURRENT PARTICIPANT, DESI RUTHERFORD. BOTH ARE PART OF THE CAFE BUILDING CREW.

Parole agents — the members of the criminal justice system who have the closest relationship with Delancey Street — respect the program but vacillate on its value. Most agree that the program will help in only the toughest of tough cases.

S.F. parole officer Colleen Costa sends about a quarter of her clients to Delancey Street — anywhere from 10 to 20 people at a time. "It's a good program,"

she says, "but it's very strong stuff. Basically, they brain-wash you and break you down, so unless you have something hanging over your head, like a 1-0-0-0-0-n-g prison sentence, you're not going to make it. You go in and they constantly yell at you, they make you seem like you're nothing, and only then, they start to build you up. The image you had of yourself before, it's gone. There are eyes watching you 24 hours a day. That's why such a high percentage leaves.

"That's one reason Delancey takes only the worst of the worst," Costa adds. "The worst ones have a reason to succeed there. People with an option — someone there just for drug use, say, or someone who has a family to fall back on — they won't stay. They can't put up with it because it's too stringent, so they come out and start using again, restart their lives as petty criminals. I mean, at Delancey Street, you're talking about people who've been using for 20, 30 years. They're coming out of the drug culture, and it's like, culture shock. Delancey Street — it's like trying to teach a kid how to make it in society, how to balance a checkbook, how to get up at seven in the morning, how to have a job. They just don't have a clue. They don't know about middle-class lives and middle-class values. For some of them, Delancey Street's methods are just too massive. They aren't given any leeway for their usual b.s. excuses, manipulation. Without the drastic change that Delancey Street puts them through, the people there probably would not change. But they won't change back out on the street either. That harshness unfortunately leads to a lot of quick failures."

Still, the success of those who do stay with the Delancey Street program raises questions about softer, more traditional methods of criminal rehabilitation.

As Terry Watkins, a Solano County probation officer who has worked with Delancey Street for more than 20 years, says: "What's wrong with washing all the s - - - out of your brain? Delancey Street just doesn't feel sorry for anyone."

The system imposes what amounts to 24-hour surveillance on new arrivals. If you don't report infractions by others, you are considered just as culpable as they — they're "holding your contract." There's little time for relaxation or physical recreation and outside contact with old friends, community, and family is deeply discouraged. You cannot go home without a Delancey Street buddy. Harsh though it may sound, however, Delancey Street is simply not about punishment.

"We say, 'Just fix it,'" Silbert says. "Know you did it. Feel bad. And move on. Do the behavior and eventually the feeling will come; you don't have to mean it. These people are moral blank slates. They learn by repetition."

The place is unrelentingly nice-looking; almost every Delancey Street new arrival has no idea that this is actually *Delancey Street*; they think it's some kind of high-class business office in an apartment building. There is no spot in the block-long, three-cornered complex reserved for punishment except the dishwashing area of the kitchen. A haircut from other residents and Silbert herself, plus a stint in dishwashing is usually the extent of discipline for unruly residents. (Other drug and criminal rehabilitation facilities may discipline through group embarrassment, humiliation or ostracism — "Can you imagine?" Silbert asks — or with demerits, or taking away privileges.)

There are three rules at Delancey Street ("Really,

we have millions of rules," says Silbert, "but only three are inviolable."): No drugs. No violence. No threats of violence. A single infraction of one of these three, and you're out.

Every day, Silbert spends time with file folders full of notes and letters from residents. These communications are full of requests for favors, as well as thanks, suggestions, complaints and tattle-telling. She receives frequent notes from one grateful resident who, in his latest letter, wrote: "I not handsome. My mother never hug me never say anything to me. You like a concern mother ..."

All Silbert's best friends as a child were bad kids, troublemakers, hard-luck cases. When her family moved from Matapan, Mass., a small, tight-knit, working-class, immigrant community, to Brookline, Boston's enclave for the financially secure, Silbert watched as her friends from the old neighborhood fell apart, failed, and turned out bad, all because of what she calls "a fast flip of the coin" that landed her up and the others down.

"My loyalty to those kids is probably the most immediate reason why I became interested in criminology," she says. "In my mind, this or that kid had a better heart than I did, and the inequity really irked me. I knew the kids from Matapan that went bad, the ones who ended up in prison. I knew their little hearts; they gave you their best little aggie (marble). They got dealt a bad hand, and it all started rolling in the other direction."

Silbert herself was raised in a warm featherbed of love and attention, an only child who adored both her parents, especially her late father, whom she still calls, in a coquettish little girl voice, "My Daddy." Her parents, Herbie and Dena Halper, were Eastern European immigrants. Herbie Halper ran a corner pharmacy in Matapan when Mimi was little, expanding the business there before moving the family to Brookline. Every step of the way, Herbie, Dena, and Mimi, too, were goaded and urged on and pestered and pushed by their big, loquacious, argumentative, extended family.

"It was a classic American immigrant experience," she says now. "Sometimes I hated it — the interference, annoyance, nosiness. Now I love it. I think it's the only way to grow up. It's the model for Delancey Street. I was a quote, 'good girl,'" Silbert says. "I jerked soda in my Daddy's store. I was a cheerleader. When I got voted the nicest girl in my high-school class, I thought, 'Horrible, I must not have any character.' After that, I went out and got some bad kids to teach me to curse."

They did a good job. At 53, though, Silbert still has the bounce and verve and sparkly disposition of that nicest girl. She considers her Tinkerbell size a security asset in dealing with large mean men and tough mean women, but her personality can be on the grand side, with a tendency never to shut up or to be at a loss for an opinion on any subject.

Although in some ways Silbert is a product of the politics of the 1960s, she has none of that decade's style or pretensions or affectations — that you have to be bad, alienated, down, mean, and cynical to be intelligent, worthy, respected. She's still a cheerleader at heart, and it's hard not to want to toss a pinch of salt on her incurable optimism. When you quote Mencken to Silbert about no one ever losing money underestimating the intelligence of the American people, she has a ready response, in her strong Boston accent: "No one ever lost any money overestimating them either. I try to overestimate everyone. People say 'You're so naive.' I say 'Abso-f-----lutely.' I am naive by choice."

"Cool is something I never was," Silbert says proudly. "At Delancey Street, I've learned to loathe coolness, because it's all about image and falseness. It's something that gives you the distance to be mean and tough, to swagger, to lie to yourself, and never change. I prefer hugging and seeming ridiculous ... and I think that's a better strategy for rehabilitation, too."

She's annoyingly, relentlessly friendly. ("Mimi was nice to dorks," says Susan Margolis, a writer, editor and multimedia consultant, and a friend of Silbert's since their days at Berkeley.) Even when she's being excessively nice and asking overly personal questions, she's still incorrigibly likeable.

From behind, she puts her arms around Conrad, a great solid ex-con, formerly armed and dangerous, formerly on Death Row, chattering affectionately at him in her baby-girl voice. Rather than batting her away with a brutish arm, or closing his eyes and wincing and barely putting up with it, he just smiles tolerantly.

For all her naivete, Silbert is not without real-world credentials. After she graduated from U. Mass, she was one of six students (the other five were "existential bearded men," Silbert says) chosen by Jean-Paul Sartre to read philosophy with him in Paris. She sat in clouds of tobacco smoke at Deux Magots and the Cafe Flore and talked to the bespectacled, wall-eyed master. (Nice to dorks ... Of course, being basically a Gidget sorority girl, she didn't smoke, or drink coffee, and she had a huge pony tail ... but still.)

After leaving the expatriate scene, she got doctorates in criminology and psychology from Berkeley. She did the 1950s girl thing, marrying a decent, upstanding San Francisco lawyer, but three years later — with her two-year-old twin boys in tow — she divorced him to live in sin with ex-convict, 8th-grade dropout and former drug addict John Maher, with whom she founded Delancey Street and with whom she remained, more or less, until his death in 1988.

"You know, her father was a big influence on Mimi. He prided himself on being a good businessman, with the emphasis on the real meaning of 'good,'" says Margolis. "Sartre was another big influence. In his work, which is so unfashionable now, he took absurdity and gave life meaning. But she took what he taught her and made it more real and more specific than he

could ever have dreamed. She once said to me, 'Some people invent a vaccine, but others have to be willing to go down into the swamp and wrestle with the actual disease.'

The other major influence in Silbert's life was Maher. A great, brawny man with a gift for verbal acrobatics and jibing, stabbing, turns of phrase, Maher had just emerged from a life of drug addiction and alcohol abuse when he began to pursue Silbert. At first, he went after her for purely professional reasons. He'd heard about the post-graduate work she was doing at Berkeley, where she'd help found and was running a rehab clinic for criminals in which the main tool for healing was a kind of mutual dependence among patients. Maher happened to be starting up a similar program for ex-cons and thought Silbert could help him.

"He wanted me to do the only thing he thought professionals were worthy of, which was write a grant proposal for him," Silbert says. "Of course I refused, because I don't believe in grants or taking money, and we had a fight."

From then on their future was sealed.

This Beatrice and Benedict battled their way quickly into a relationship based on mutual admiration and a kind of twinship. Organically, with little planning or paperwork, they created their idea of Delancey Street, constructing and assembling it out of nothing at all, into an institution of national standing. "We were together 24-hours a day and we both had extraordinarily strong emotions and opinions," Silbert says. "We each thought the other was a genius because we absolutely agreed on everything intuitively."

To this day, she cannot remember whose idea it was to call the project Delancey Street. "It could have been either of us," she says. "It sounds like him or me. It sounds like both of us."

But Maher was from a different background. He had a streetwise caniness that Silbert lacked. He was an eighth-grade dropout and she was a double PhD. He was a former addict and she was the straightest arrow that ever set up residence in San Francisco. He was wary and she rushed headlong into experience. She naturally trusted everyone, and he naturally trusted no one but her. He was a great character who loomed over the project like an outsize hero — "a movement leader," Silbert calls him — and she was someone who liked to deal person-to-person. In any confrontation with authority, she was the good cop and he was the bad. The first days of Delancey Street were financed on the run. The foundation, which started out with about 40 residents, subsisted on Silbert's salary from teaching criminology and psychology at San Francisco State and from various consulting jobs — she trained police departments; she developed a master plan for corrections for the state of New Mexico; she did the first independent study of the California prison system for the state legislature — plus the salaries of two residents with secretarial and management jobs. Maher's job was

talking Delancey Street into existence.

"He made it real in the public's mind," Silbert says. When the population expanded to about 80, three years after the foundation was established, Delancey Street moved to a new building in San Francisco's yuppie Pacific Heights. Waiting for the town house that had housed the former Soviet Embassy to become available, Delancey Street rented a place from the United Arab Republic, which had been forced to move out of its premises when the U.S. cut off diplomatic relations. The neighborhood was not particularly welcoming to this new community of ex-convicts and former drug addicts. Worse, the U.S. suddenly did an about face and re-recognized the U.A.R., so the State Department tried to get Delancey Street out and the U.A.R. back in. But they had not reckoned with the Silbert-Maher team, which ran things like a comedy duo in dead earnest. "When the first phone call came from the State Department, we took it on extensions and both intuitively fell into our roles," Silbert says. "I was the goody-goody, and John was righteous indignation. He would say 'Move! What do you mean, move?' and I would say, 'Well, of course we'll move, but we really can't account for what's going to happen when this bunch of violent felons is left without a home.' And then John, on one extension, would say to me on the other, 'You gotta think about people like Louis the Lip,' and I would say, 'God, I forgot about Louis the Lip,' and lapse into a kind of stunned silence. And then the bureaucrat on the other end would answer with some tight, scared bureaucratic regulation type answer, and we'd get off the phone and just roll around and giggle and jump up and down . . . But the fact was, we were about to be screwed."

The stand-off went on for months until the Soviet Embassy opened up and Delancey Street moved into the bigger space. Russia, as the new place was called, was almost immediately full, and then overflowing (Maher once described himself and Silbert as "den parents to 200 large tattooed people.")

"They were both so happy, even in some hideous moments they had with Delancey Street," Margolis says. "In fact, they reveled in the hideousness. At the time, I guess the mid or late '70s, they seemed enormously powerful. They were big time in San Francisco; they were the golden couple. I remember seeing them at a Teddy Kennedy cocktail party — everyone wanted to touch them and be near them; Delancey Street was this audacious, altruistic new project, and successful, which everyone loves. They were like socialites, both incredibly charming. They were the people you wanted to have at your thing, whatever thing you were having. And John was so funny; Mimi loves that. He would say about fund-raisers, 'If you want to pick someone's pocket, you bump into 'em first.'"

Maher liked to say: "When you are an absolute incompetent, you can either be a bum or a great social leader; I failed at the bum part." For Silbert, being with

Maher was like coming home to all the abandoned, sad-hearted, chipper, wise-cracking boys she had left behind long ago in Matapan. But Maher was those sweet boys all grown up, with a grown-up's bitter experience and a grown-up's edge. The full length of his trajectory could not be predicted; he was too volatile.

"John had ghosts, and my mother never had any," says Greg Silbert, who is getting his PhD in philosophy at Yale. He and his twin brother, David, were brought up by Silbert, Maher, and their father, Kenneth Silbert, then a labor lawyer who is now an arbitrator (and by a Delancey Street resident and ex-con named Sonny, who was basically the children's nanny).

"John made us our breakfast every morning, and tried to get us to finish our eggs, but he was sometimes clearly out of his element as a father because he did not grow up in any normal kind of home," Greg remembers. "He was extremely intense, and there's a way in which people who function with that level of intensity are amazing and captivating, but sometimes frightening. As we got older, you could see a frightening side of him become more dominant. He could be harshly critical. He hated injustice. Eventually, he began to see injustice everywhere, and took it rather personally. He really wanted to be good and Delancey Street is a manifestation of that, even though, like everyone at Delancey, he had no models of what it is like to be good. They all are longing for something good and pure, and my mother was that for them, for him. And then we were these two blond little innocent twins. He always spared us his scorn, and my mother, but not the residents of Delancey. The place takes a lot of selflessness to run, everyone needs all this commitment and attention, and John was eventually unable to do that. He saw enemies everywhere, and he was driven by those ghosts. And eventually they just drowned out everything else. He saw the world against him, and the volume got louder and louder and filled up more of the space in his head and he couldn't make reasonable decisions. He couldn't manage Delancey Street anymore. That's what happened."

But that's not all that happened.

Maher began to drink again, making inebriated speeches before Delancey Street's residents to make it clear he was no longer capable of believing in them. He told them that he was going down, and intended to take them with him. (This from their self-styled "den parent.") His behavior became so erratic and destructive that in 1984, he resigned from Delancey Street. He tried repeatedly to sober up, living for a time at the Delancey Street Ranch in New Mexico but unable to stop his demons.

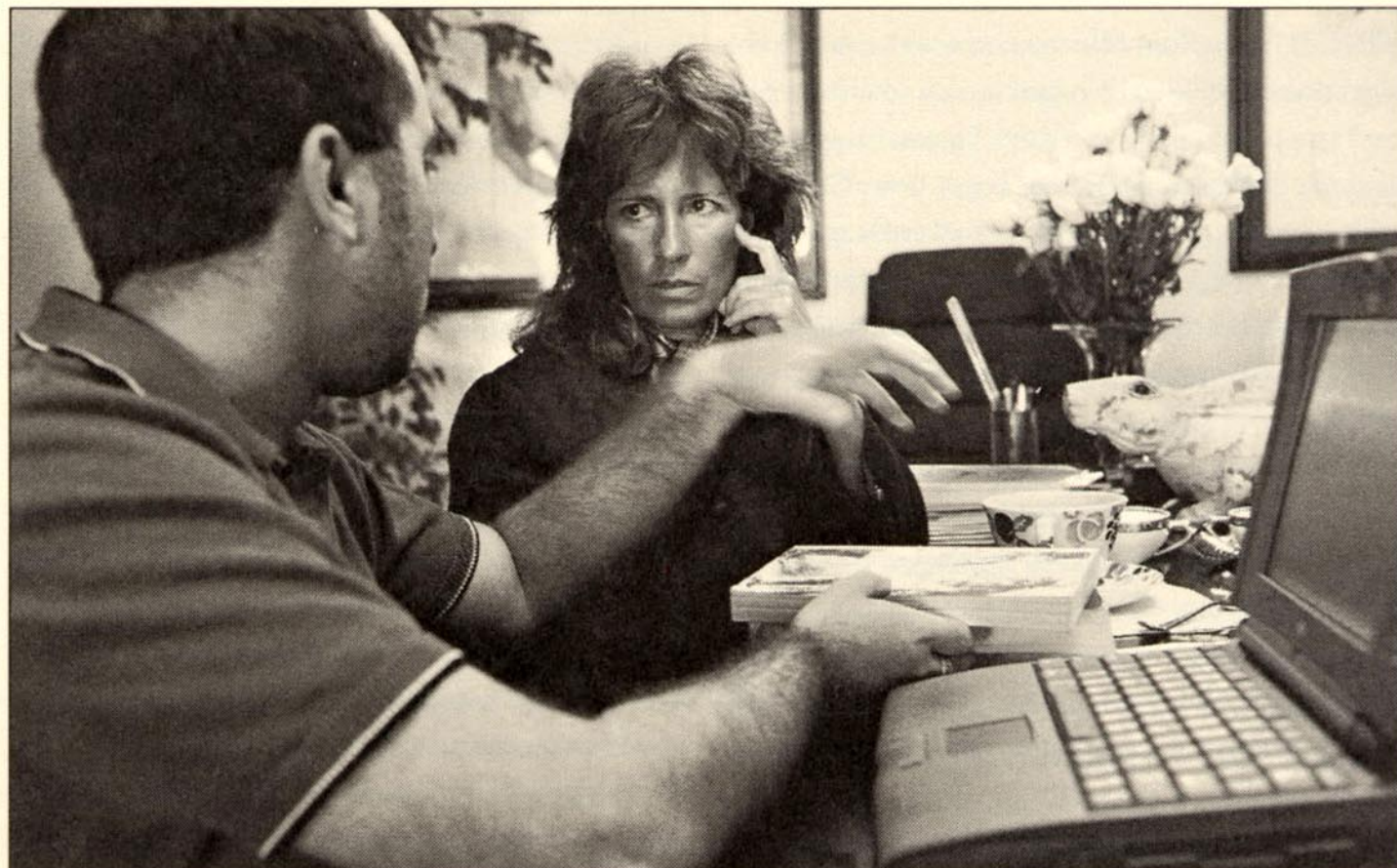
Moreover, Silbert was unable to stop him. For her, Maher's decline meant a kind of despair she had never known.

"There was this horror of living with yourself and, no matter how much you know what is the right thing to do, you can't make it happen, even for someone you

love," Silbert remembers. "You can't even do it with love — and I've obviously believed that love can do anything — you can't exert control over someone's life who isn't choosing to do something for himself. I always had said that rescue is not the thing, the thing is standing side by side and fighting for someone and with someone. But here I was trying rescue, and it wasn't working. I had to watch him go down. I could see how angry he was at himself, and I was angry because I couldn't help."

By the time Maher resigned from Delancey and the couple separated, Silbert had helped more than 5,000 people regain their lives from alcohol, drugs, and violence. She'd convinced men and women she'd never met before, people with whom she had nothing in common, to get straight and pull themselves together. Now, the one person closest to her was beyond her reach, and all her openness and optimism went for naught. Maher's decline was her worst disappointment — and such a massive, intimate failure came especially hard to a woman who'd never before failed at anything. On top of it came the death by cancer of her father, after a protracted and painful siege.

"Mimi never went to pieces overtly," Margolis remembers. "But her verve failed her and she lost a lot of weight on a person who doesn't weigh much in the first place. She seemed a little lost, which for Mimi is a lot." Silbert says that her personality changed. "I found that I had lost my strength, which is my intuitive feeling of warmth. I spent some time wondering what a person like me does when the love doesn't come naturally." What she did ("Of course," she says now) was embark on a Herculean project. Delancey Street was growing. Russia was too small for its 300 or so inhabitants. They'd build a new place, Silbert decided, one that would really suit their needs and show the world what they were capable of. The new building could not be purchased; it would have to be built, because Silbert wanted it to be both a symbol of Delancey Street's goals and ideals and a perfect place to do the work she and Maher had set out to do. Moreover, the people of Delancey Street would have to do the building, to keep costs down and "the family" invested in its new home. It was a massive but somehow domestic project, full of visions of flower boxes, fountains, swimming pools and dining rooms, a project that fittingly, rose from the ashes of Silbert's wrecked personal life. A new house for the widow. Or a living monument to her work with Maher. (In fact, he died in 1988, two years before the project was completed. He did not attend the 1985 groundbreaking.) Another analogy, grandiose but nevertheless apropos, is to the building of Israel, whose establishment in 1948, when Silbert was six, was the most important public event in her parents' lives, and has been an emotional talisman for Silbert ever since. The new Delancey Street was a huge labor of love, constructed from faith and little else in a place where no one thought such an edifice could be erected. The ter-



SILBERT'S SON, GREG, HELPS HER WITH EDUCATIONAL PLANNING.

rain — the no-residence-zoned land along the Embarcadero — was inhospitable. Silbert expended enormous amount of political energy getting permits to go ahead with construction. Worse, none of the Delancey Street residents who did the actual physical building knew what he or she was doing. No one knew how to drive a backhoe, how to use a bulldozer, how to mix cement, how to do masonry: all abilities were learned on the job, often from union people whose organizations donated their time. Silbert says: "Sometimes a wall would go up, and it would be lopsided, because we didn't know what we were doing. The only one who had any experience was one guy who had helped lay the concrete for a shuffleboard court at San Quentin. So we'd look at the lopsided wall, and then they'd decide, 'Let's take it down and put it up again.'"

Launching the \$12-million project was not easy. "I had to learn to read a spreadsheet," Silbert moans. Eventually, after going to every bank in San Francisco, she managed to convince the Bank of America for a four-year, \$10 million line of credit that would not be secured against the building. "We did not want to mortgage our future," she says. (Bank of America officials now attend the annual Delancey Street Seder, and dance in the evening's traditional fin-de-soirée kickline.) Delancey Street used only about \$6 million of its available credit, paying back the four-year loan in three years and change. While they were paying back the bank, Silbert says, "I didn't buy a goddamn light bulb." The construction was one of the few Delancey Street projects Silbert fund-raised for, something she hates doing. She raised several million dollars, and used Delancey's low-income-housing tax credits to help pay back the loan. More than 2,500 small, unsolicited donations came in. Most importantly, millions of dollars in materials and services were donated. The construction — a triangular-shaped, two-story edifice that surrounds a huge courtyard and inner buildings, and oc-

cupies a full commercial block — took five years to erect. During that time, Silbert met and got to know San Francisco's private sector, people like Mickey Drexler, head of the Gap, Howard Lester, president of Williams Sonoma and The Pottery Barn, and Denise Hale, the absolutely correct, Romanian-born, Garbo-accented, white-haired, virtually eyebrowless doyenne of San Francisco society and fashion. (Hale calls Silbert "my flake," and is famous at Delancey Street for having given a large and unsolicited contribution to the foundation, as well as impeccably wrapped and much appreciated copies of Tiffany's Table Manners to several residents. Lester, too, has given a large donation to Delancey Street and intends to open his second San Francisco Pottery Barn superstore inside the Delancey Street complex, to be run by Delancey Street people trained by the Pottery Barn.) Silbert herself has gone from being a glittering character among San Francisco's large progressive community to a pillar of the city's society. The transition came at a time when Silbert did not have a deep emotional reservoir to tap. "I had to be as tough a business person as comes," she says. "I was marching around being a brilliant leader, a battleground general on the building site, but I was making no connection, and a couple of people noticed. They said, 'You used to spend so many hours talking with everyone, but now you just feel inaccessible.' I was like a newcomer to Delancey Street. Like them, I felt like a failure. I had failed John; I had, in some way, failed my daddy. I had no feelings, just like a newcomer. I was hard and unreachable. So I called a general meeting. I told them what I felt like. I told them that I was going to do what I had told each of them to do when they started at Delancey Street. I said, 'I'm going to act as if I care and as if it's all real to me, and trust that eventually it will become really real.'

"But it was all rote for a long time. I had meetings and cried publicly about what had happened, and tore my-

self inside out in front of everyone — and exactly what I had described would happen to them happened to me. I stopped thinking about me. I got so caught up in everyone else that one day I noticed, 'Oh my God, I actually love this person I'm talking to. I can stay vulnerable. I can love people again.' Once that happened to me, as opposed to just watching it happen to them, I became even more completely confident about our process."

This was Maher's unintended legacy to Silbert and to Delancey Street. His torment became hers, and her sense of failure allowed her to experience for the first time what Delancey Street really meant. Her re-emergence as a happy person renewed her faith, and her very public crisis helped residents see that no one was perfect, that anyone could lapse, fail — and still recover.

"Nobody thought we could build this building, but we believed and we succeeded," Silbert says. "This building was my dream. I remember being in Italy once, walking by a beautiful place with planters and beautiful flower boxes. ... You just passed the doorway and could glance into the courtyard and there was a big Italian mama, chasing a kid with a frying pan. That's how I wanted Delancey street to be. I'm the mama, of course. And ours turned out to be the prettiest of all the condos that eventually went up off the Embarcadero. People keep coming in from the street trying to rent. 'What do we have to do to get in here?,' they ask. ... I say, 'Well, first, get out there and commit a first degree felony ...'"

Once you're accepted by Delancey Street, you come off the bench, out of Immigration, and onto Maintenance. (If you're a drug addict, you may have to go through a period of withdrawal; Silbert compares heroin withdrawal to "a bad case of the flu," and scoffs at those who claim to be physically incapable of giving it up.) At Delancey Street, maintenance, a word that in the outside penal and drug-prevention world might bring to mind a regime of methadone, means actual *maintenance*: maintaining the grounds, gardens and property of Delancey Street. When you walk through the airy, cheerful, Italianate complex — window boxes filled with flourishing annuals, shrubbery clipped, gardens manicured — you see bands of four to ten men and women standing around in work clothes, with shovels, dust rags, mops, buckets, hoes, spades and menacing garden shears, each group under the watchful eye of a supervisor.

"We don't let you make your own decisions for a long time," Silbert says. "After all, a little baby will burn itself if you leave it near the fire, and it will die if you let it cross the street alone. The new people are my newborns. They are like children: If you give them a choice before they are able to make it responsibly, you leave them with nothing. You have to stand up to the people you care about, make them take their piano lessons,

even if they don't want to. They have to learn to read, whether they like it or not. In this country, especially in the criminal justice system, we've never really looked at parenting enough. Well, here at Delancey Street, we're bringing people up all over again — and this time we're doing it right."

Authority is important at Delancey Street. In the early days, when residents are just off the street or out of prison, they often feign or pretend this respect. At Delancey Street, this is called "as-iffing." "You as-if it until it really *is* you," says Frank Schweikert, former armed robber and heroin addict, who is now an assistant to Silbert. "We're deceitful, we're sneaky, we're sleazy. Delancey Street makes a commitment to put up with you. But everybody is watching everyone else. Unlike prison, here you're accountable."

Besides behavioral transformation, Silbert's other main concern is education. Delancey Street offers high-school level liberal arts courses in literature, composition, math, as well as classes in art and music appreciation, creative writing, American music. Seminars in parenting and relationships are available, and, literacy is taught — by residents to residents. A fifth-grade-level reader teaches a third-grade-level reader in a system Silbert calls "each one-teach one." Once a month, conservatory students come and play classical music. Delancey Street provides professional training in catering, sales, typing, printing, truck-driving, auto mechanics, and dailies processing for the film industry. It owns about a hundred cars and a caravan of trucks that are used by its moving company, which is based across from the residence on the port side of San Francisco's broad waterfront Embarcadero. ("Don't you love it?" Silbert asks. "Ex-cons in a moving business, where the basic thing they do is they go into your home and pack up your valuables and bring them somewhere else.")

Delancey Street also runs the only credit union that accepts felons ("Imagine it," says Watkins, the Solano County probation officer. "The world's best bad check artists, forgers ...") At Christmas, Street residents sell Christmas trees all over town, and help decorate hotel lobbies. What allows residents to appear fit for all these jobs is "shopping," a favorite Delancey Street pursuit. A spacious first-floor office is reserved for this activity. Every three months, donated clothing is arranged here by sex and size, and every resident gets a pick of the goods. The first one to choose is Silbert ("I always tell them that I get the same clothes as everyone else, I just happen to go first," she says.) The choice gets more limited as the lines of seniority descend. For Christmas, Silbert makes up gift packages of outfits selected by her for each resident.

"I try to teach them what goes together," she says, holding on to Schweikert's lapel. "Like, see that line of blue there in the plaid? Now choose a tie to bring that out, and make sure your pants go with it, too." She lets go of Frank, who is shaking his head wryly, and smiling down at her indulgently. Seniority doesn't just get you

better clothes, and a better job than maintenance, it gets you out of crowded dorms (eight to a room) and into apartments; it moves you from dorm head (in charge of one room) to "conciierge," responsible for a hallway full of rooms; it gets you from, as Silbert says, "not being able to do anything to being in charge of everything everyone else does." It makes you into a big kid, and then into a grown-up. "This is your family, and the big kids take care of the little ones. That's how I've organized it, and that's what it's about," Silbert says.

"As I said, it's a family of 500 violent people. I'm serious about all parts of that characterization. For years, penal experts said we were too strict. We *are* strict, especially mentally and morally. We insist on accountability at all times, we duck nothing. We make you acknowledge truths. All the things people don't like said out loud, we say out loud, in front of everybody."

Delancey Street security is rattling the glass-plated doors of a vacant space that occupies a corner of the complex. "They do that every half hour," says Silbert. She is planning a project for this space, the Crossroads Cafe, which will be Delancey Street's bookstore and coffee shop, and is discussing her plans with Andy Ross, who owns Cody's bookstore in Berkeley; Kathy Foster, a former Random House editor, and Susan Margolis, the writer, editor and multimedia consultant who has known Silbert since their Berkeley days in the '60s. "The way I think of it is as combining everything that represents the intelligentsia, plus ice cream for me because I must have it at all times, Silbert says, while Ross, a hippie-ish entrepreneur looks on in stunned wonder. "I want it to be part bookstore, part cafe, part art gallery, because we have so much donated art, we don't know what to do with it."

"But remember," she adds, pointing a finger "our population is literally illiterate, and they're the ones who are going to have to do the selling. Oh, and I do want all those international magazines and newspapers. Paris Match, because that's what I used to read in Paris. And I want cyberspace, even though I have no idea what it is. And displays on pushcarts. This is Delancey Street. We have to have pushcarts!" Ross explains the ins-and-outs of book distribution to Silbert, and gestures around the room to show how the store could be laid out to accommodate the books, cafe, ice cream, magazines. But Silbert is not finished. She watches Ross, listening intently, and waits for her moment to jump in and take over the discussion. "What we have to do," she says, "is find the head of this distribution company, and get him to donate. ... He doesn't know it, but he's going to donate services. And then I want to find a local small press that's never done anything, and promote them, on the theory that we always want another struggler with us. And we're going to have a lot of chess tables, so we'll only have room for two or three on-line computers." Ross just looks at her.

"Don't panic," Margolis laughs. "This is how she gets things done."

Although Silbert is a mother, a daughter and a criminologist, oddly enough, criminology is the thing that least informs her work. Her experiences as the head of a family and as the child in a family are what fuel her professional and intellectual life. As do so many adults, she has recreated the family of her childhood in her adulthood. Because she sees all behavior as derived from family and upbringing, she refuses to isolate facets of criminal behavior or deal with them in isolation. For example, she does not believe that drug abuse and crime are inseparable.

"It's all part of the same culture, the same upbringing, but it's not causally related," she says. "Like, you don't go out and buy a BMW because you eat kiwi fruit and drink Evian water (although) the two are part of the same lifestyle." Stopping drug abuse is not necessarily addressing the reasons for criminal behavior. "Here's an example: There was this guy here, his mother lay on the couch all day and boffed all his friends for money, so she could buy drugs. I tried to explain to him: 'Of course you had feelings. Here was a woman who never cooked a meal for you. You were just a little boy; you didn't ask for this.' And he starts screaming at me: 'Don't say that! She did too cook a meal for me.'

"What it turned out was that she had taken a can of like Dinty Moore chili or something, and opened it and put it in a dish. I mean, she didn't even warm it up, and he's telling me this to defend his mother. Finally, he broke down, this huge, violent ex-con, and began to sob, and in between these heaving sobs he asked me if I remembered the old Curad TV commercial. There's this little boy in the ad, and he gets a cut, and he goes running to his mother, and she comes and puts a BandAid on his knee. He said, 'That's all I wanted.' Somewhere he had all this desire for love and belonging, for someone to put the little Curad on his little knee. Yeah, we've got a lot of animal stories here. You have to teach them to give up on romanticizing their past; you know, telling you their mother was a really good mom who once threw some Dinty Moore in a f----- bowl. They've got to give it up and start over. It's not just the drugs.

"No one really cares about 'the underclass,'" Silbert says. "The liberals and the conservatives and the neo-thises and the neo-thats only care about the part of the underclass that bites at them. I say to the people here, 'Your relatives are dying on the streets. You have to turn it around. I'll fight for you as long as you're good, but if you f--- us over, I'll run to the nearest cop and turn you in. If we don't band together, it's the bottom going down.'

"Policymakers think: 'If I went to prison, I'd be miserable, because I have everything to lose.' The people who actually do go to prison have nothing to lose. For

them it's comfortable, for the most part. They're there with their friends, their kind of 'values' run the place, they get three meals a day. They can watch TV in their cell, and they have no responsibilities. F - - - that. Everyone here says it's harder than prison. (Prison rumor has it that Delancey Street makes you shave your head and wear toilet seats around the neck as punishment, untrue reports based on the old California-based Synanon rehab cult.) I choose what they can watch on TV, for example, mostly news. You live in a fantasy in prison. You write great love letters, because you never have to see your girlfriend. You send your kid a teddy bear and never have to take care of him. It's easy. They get the same old drugs, they run with the big gangs. It teaches them more about what they already know.

"The real horror is how emotionally easy it is. It's comfortable like a bad relationship. The lawmakers wouldn't like to be there, but the people there are comfortable. When they're not in prison they actually miss it. Then they come here, and you have to care about other people; you have to work; you have to study. It's hard enough when you're two or three or four years old to learn about the consequences of your actions. But when you are 34 and huge and have an image to protect. ... Well, it's very painful. The horror is logical in prison, but none of it makes sense once you're here."

Gerald Miller is talking about a guy who hasn't been at Delancey Street too long. Miller is his barber. Silbert has called all the tribe leaders and barbers together to the Vatican to discuss the residents' progress this "semester." About 40 people have convened, sitting around in comfortable corporate-looking chairs gathered in a square. At the head of the square sits Silbert, dwarfed by a largish wood and leather upholstered chair. Miller is saying how this one guy is coming along pretty well, even if no one likes him. Silbert says: "Well, he's also a nasty, cocky little p-----."

She kicks away a footstool, crosses her little legs Indian-style on the big leather-covered seat, takes a sip of tea from the oversized cup that has been brought to her, and sits there like Alice in Wonderland in a shrinking phase. Like many of the tribe leaders, Miller is trying to pump up his people. Mike, another tribe leader, says: "I've been pushing this guy to open up and trust people a little. He's kind of opened his first door; he's taking that risk — I mean, he's no ball of fire, but still ..." Everyone giggles as Mike stumbles in his attempt to make his man seem worthy. All the tribe leaders are hoping that the men and women in their tribes will be promoted to better positions next semester. Of one particularly difficult case, Charlotte says, "Well, she's really trying to walk the right line now." Silbert looks skeptical and says, "Oh, we'll see her asshole one day soon. With the right people she knows how to kiss ass, but she's a real bitch to everyone else."

Another female tribe leader adds: "You know, she's just the opposite of when I knew her before, on the out-

side. Back then, she was just wild, acting out." "She was loaded," Silbert says. "Right? She didn't have a single feeling for 28 years?"

"Let's face it," says another female barber. "She's really going through it with the other women in the kitchen now. You know, really she is one of the most evil, manipulative, lying ..." "Well," Silbert says, laughing. "I guess we've had enough of her ..."

The meeting goes on for more than four hours, into the middle of the night.

Part of the reason behind the purity of Mimi Silbert's dedication, lies in the history of the persecution of the Jews of Europe during the past century. Silbert still remembers listening to Herbie, Dena and her aunts and uncles and cousins singing a disturbing, militant Yiddish anthem, *Zog Nit Keymmol*. The Halper family was full of refugees from Hitler and the pogroms of Eastern Europe. "My earliest memory is of my family gathering around the radio to listen to broadcasts about the founding of the state of Israel," says Silbert. "We'd sit around the radio, listen to everything that was happening and talk about the whole concept of Theodore Herzl: 'If you will it, it is no dream.'" Translated, the lyrics of *Zog Nit Keymmol* run:

*Never say that you have reached the very end
When leaden skies a bitter future may portend.
For, sure, the hour for which we yearn will yet arrive,
and our marching steps will thunder: We survive.
Not lead but blood inscribed this bitter song we sing.
'Tis not a carolling of birds upon the wing.
But 'twas a people, midst the crashing fires of hell,
That sang this song and fought courageous till it fell.*

It was always sung fervently around the noisy table in the Halper household, but until recently, when she found it on a Paul Robeson compact disc, Silbert, who can still speak her parents' Yiddish, did not know its origins. She points to the subtitle on the disc booklet: *Song of the Warsaw Ghetto*.

"Can you believe I never knew?," she says. It's like my theme song. I always thought of it as a song of the exodus to Israel, and it probably was that, too. We used to translate: 'Never say that you have gone your final way.' At the end they would sing, very loudly, 'We are here, we are here.' It was very moving. I remember being suffused with emotion when my parents would sing it. My daddy was an intense Zionist, a Zionist of those days, very left-liberal ... All the grownups in my family had tears streaming down their faces when Israel was founded. When my son David was on his kibbutz, he kept saying to me, 'It's just like Delancey Street, Mom. It's just like Delancey Street.' * * *

Jerusalem-based Amy Wilentz is a staff writer for the New Yorker.

GERALD'S STORY

Gerald Miller, 38, was raised in Harlem by his parents, both heroin addicts and alcoholics. Gentle, slender and breakable-looking, with the height of the amateur basketball player he is, Miller always seems surprised at his ability to articulate his emotions, say what he means to say. This shock or wonder stops him from looking you in the eye. He can't believe he said it, and he looks away. He hides behind his black-framed, serious glasses, hoping the reflection will fool you into believing you can hold his gaze.

He has two long scars on either side of his neck, knife or razor wounds — he's not sure which — from an attack by a rival in the drug wars of San Francisco.

"Somebody killed my mother and dumped her in a field when I was 12 or 13," Miller says. "When I was 15, my dad died of cirrhosis. I don't really remember not doing drugs, smoking weed. In school, I'd be trying to get kids' lunch money off them. I went to live with my aunt and uncle when I was 13.

"I was mostly a street urchin. The guys I looked up to were not working-class guys like my uncle, they were pimps, dealers, con men. At 14, I started running numbers. I'd play stickball and curve ball and stoopball, but for some reason, I never made the leap to get a job. I'd hustle: let the air out of people's tires and then offer to change 'em. I was selling heroin at 14 or 15. I had to prove that I wasn't just a skinny punk, so I got in fights and hit 'em in the head with bottles. The cops would pick me up, my uncle would come and get me, but I'd just go back and do the same thing, over and over.

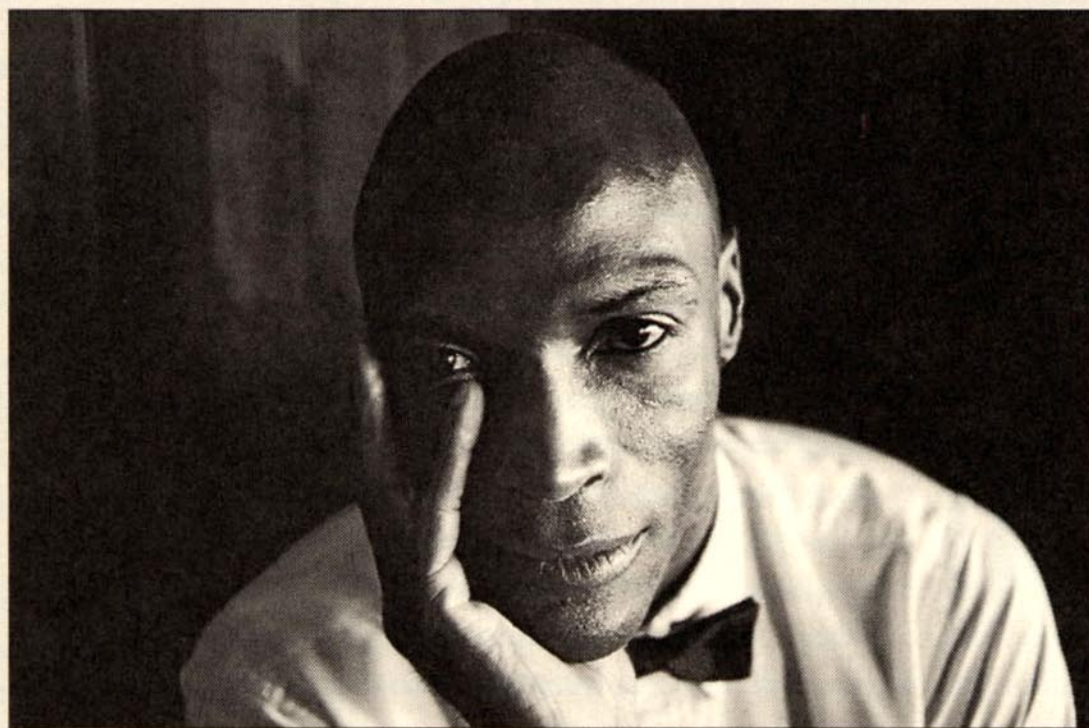
"When I was 25, I had to get out of New York because of some problems with the drug ring I was working with, so I came out to California. I burned a couple of friends in New York, and they were mad. In San Francisco, I shot up and sold, shot up and sold, and never got anywhere. I knew a lot of people, though. I could get anything I wanted: passports, guns. I was usually armed, and I was paranoid.

"I went to prison for armed robberies; usually we did jewelry stores and drug stores, stuff you could take or fence real fast. People got shot. I didn't look at it as right or wrong. It was just an accident that no one ever died. I tried to hurt people seriously, but never did.

"I was a terrible criminal, really. I was sentenced to seven years at Folsom, and did six of them, which was a lot, because I would always get into trouble. I was in a prison gang, of course. At Folsom, I did what I did on the outside: I did drugs and I hurt people. I was little in the gang, and always trying to get some attention. We used knives, blowguns, bombs. We fought against Mexicans and whites because they were Mexicans and whites and in their own gangs.

"Prison became my home, my house, where I wanted to be. When I got out, I stayed out like a

month. I shot dope, did two or three armed robberies. I was pretty crazy. I'd rob anything; I went to prison again, got worse, got frozen. I got out again, and outside, I said, 'What is this?' In prison, everything was easy. I was rearrested for possession and sales. I had dope on me. I had a gun, but threw it away when I saw the cops coming. Back in prison for another four years.



GERALD MILLER WORKS NIGHTS IN THE RESTAURANT ESPRESSO BAR. HE ALSO ATTENDS GOLDEN GATE UNIVERSITY AND WORKS IN THE COURTS AND JAILS DURING THE DAY.

"At the county jail, they told me to write to Delancey Street, but I had heard that people tell on you, that you have to work. Work was for suckers. You have to get up early in the morning, cut your hair. The people at Delancey Street were weak; if you can't make it in prison, you're weak. That's what I thought. So I went to San Q. for four.

"The prison guards were OK with the dope. It makes their lives easier. I was out for three months when I got rearrested. [deep white man's voice:] 'Mr. Miller is a danger to himself and to everyone in the community.'

"I didn't think anything, I had a girlfriend and a son — I was like a father for a half a minute. Benny, he'd be 15 now. I almost felt that the heart part of me got left out. I mean, I felt for the girl and my son, but on the other hand, I didn't, because I wasn't really there.

"So now I was an ex-con with a gun, doing robbery, robbing drug dealers. I went back to Folsom for five and did four. Outside, people were looking for me. I had no place to go, I didn't mind not getting out fast. I had set it up in my mind that I would spend the rest of my life in prison. I was out a couple of months, doing a burglary with someone stupid. I was stupid, I didn't care, and we got caught in the house by the cops. I was loaded out of my mind.

"This time, someone told me about Delancey Street again. And I was facing 12 years. When you're looking at double digits, you're in a new ball game. So I wrote Delancey Street, they came out and interviewed me, and I told them what I thought they wanted to hear. 'I want to change my life, I'm

so bad ...' I was accepted. I sat on that bench and I thought, 'Wow, this is a nice detention facility.'

"I ran into some guys I'd known in prison. One guy in particular looked healthy, was respected. He talked to me every day. I'd tell him, 'People are rapping on me.' My whole code was being broken. I'd get mad. I didn't want to hear the Delancey Street rap. I was closed, frozen, really paranoid. I didn't like having to be nice. I latched on to other main-

tenance people; we'd get together and be negative. I just wanted to be left alone. I was so scared inside and couldn't connect the way I felt with words.

"Serving in the dining room was way scarier than prison. You had to put on a tie: I didn't know how. You had to sit down and eat and talk to people about subjects. I didn't know how to do this. I had to sit with people from other races, other gangs — and women. Then, I had to work with people. I couldn't stand it. I had to sleep in a dorm with eight other guys who were telling on me for anything. The guy I live with now, I didn't talk to for two weeks at the beginning, and I tried to get everyone else not to talk to him. Hah!

"I was in the pots and the dishes a lot, but eventually I started learning from

my mistakes. Now, two white guys are my friends. It took a long time, but now people are just people. I got my GED (high-school diploma equivalency); I had read a lot in prison, anyway. I would read anything: Victor Hugo, Swift, and No Exit by Sartre, Mimi's guy (I thought he had written in the 17th or 18th century, and then I see this article about how Mimi had studied under him. I almost died of shock.)

"I've always been in awe of Mimi; she has that presence. I was respectfully nervous around her. She's someone you can trust; she is going to be there no matter what. And trust was never my thing.

"Now, I'm an administrative assistant to the president — that's Mimi — and I work in the criminal justice department, which means we go to prison and interview people who want to come here. Here, I've worked in sales, in the warehouse. I got my driver's license. I was in charge of maintenance. I was planning on leaving in two years, but I got pulled in. I enjoyed things. I do not want to work out, I have a life here. If I want to, I can go to a play, a movie, or a symphony. (I remember the first time Mimi took us to the symphony. I was overwhelmed. It was really tight, organized, together.)

"Anyway, I've seen how out of it I was before. I did my dissipation here after a year, and it was the first time I had shed a tear in 20 years. After my dad died, I went out and played basketball on a cold day. But I did not cry."

—Amy Wilentz