

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-

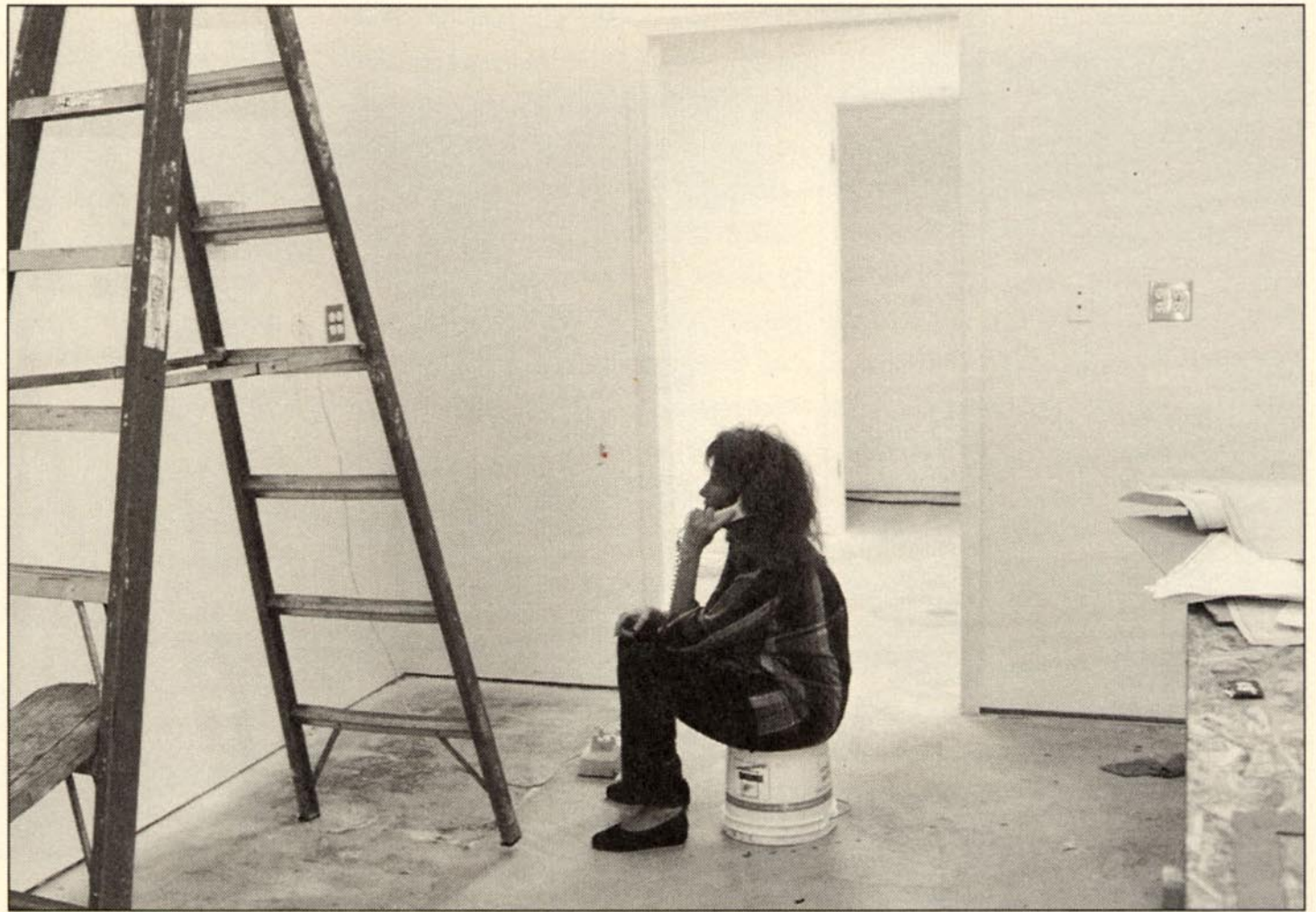
proach her with shy diffidence. A rangy, chewed-up woman with a cigarette tipped from her lips beams when Silbert showers her with approval. Silbert greets everyone with a chirrupy "Hi," often accompanied by a first name, although she admits she doesn't know the names of all 500 residents.

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 brainwash 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.