

Reprinted from: **FAST COMPANY**

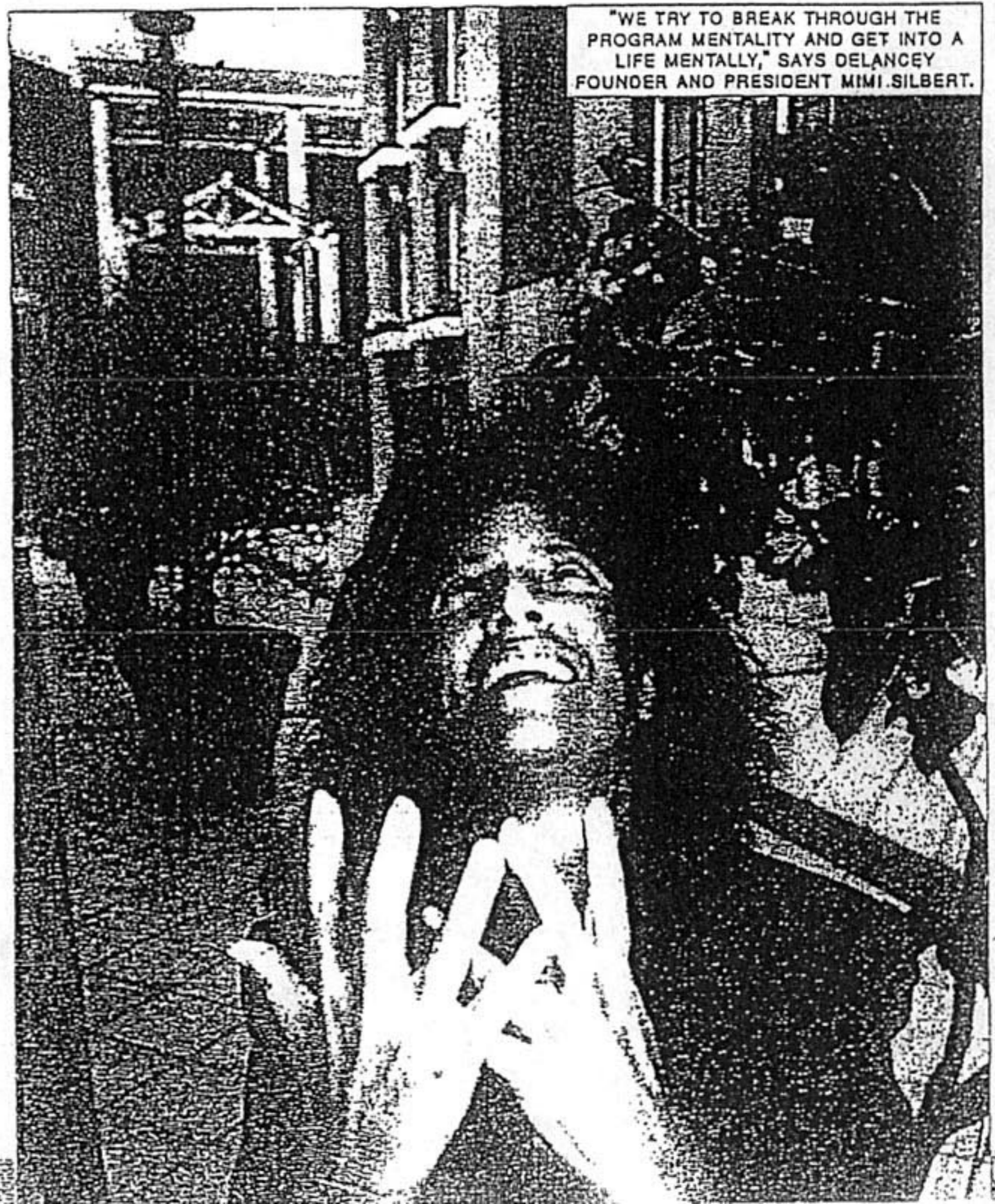
# She Helps Them Help Themselves

Mimi Silbert's "Harvard for the underclass" teaches ex-cons how to change their lives. Ready for a lesson? By Katharine Mieszkowski

**W**HAT HAPPENS WHEN HARD-CORE ex-cons and former drug addicts sit down with Stanford Business School students? At San Francisco-based Delancey Street Foundation, the aspiring MBAs are the ones who take notes.

It wasn't always that way. When the organization was founded in 1971, it consisted of ten recovering addicts and one criminal psychologist, all living in one cramped apartment. As the ad-hoc rehabilitation program for addicts, prostitutes, and thieves evolved into an unorthodox combination of residential center and entrepreneurial incubator, the experts came calling. Their professional opinion? "I heard it over and over again," says Mimi Silbert, 56, Delancey's founder and president. "'You can't do that. That's no way to run a business.'"

The business-school professors and criminal reformers had a fundamental objection: The center is run by its residents—by "managers" who have served an average of four prison terms, who have an average of 18 criminal convictions, and who have been addicted to drugs for an average of 10 years. What's more, Delancey has only one "pro-



"WE TRY TO BREAK THROUGH THE PROGRAM MENTALITY AND GET INTO A LIFE MENTALLY," SAYS DELANCEY FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT MIMI SILBERT.

JUNE : JULY, 1998

fessional" staffer: Silbert, who accepts no salary and who wears donated clothes.

Despite the criticism, Delancey flourished. Today the foundation has 1,500 full-time residents in five self-run facilities around the United States—including a spectacular 350,000-square-foot complex on San Francisco's waterfront, and a rural ranch in San Juan Pueblo, New Mexico. The organization operates some 20 businesses that function as training schools—from an automotive shop, to the nationwide Delancey Street Moving Company, to a hip restaurant that has become a favorite hangout for the city's political and media types.

In the last decade, Delancey has received dozens of honors—from Congress, presidents of the United States, governors, and mayors. The foundation's 12,000 graduates have gone on to become lawyers, doctors, small-business owners, restaurateurs, mechanics, contractors, and salespeople.

Silbert has succeeded where most have failed—by simply redefining the problem: "The standard debate about criminals is, Should they receive punishment—or therapy? Is it an illness, or are they bad?" In posing those questions, she says, "Nobody makes the critical point: We need these people. The country is missing something because a huge bulk of its population is not a part of it. They have talents we need."

With a combination of entrepreneurial zeal and old-fashioned tough-mindedness, Silbert set out to tap this hidden talent pool. The result? A cross between survival training and a liberal-arts education. "We try to break through the program mentality and get into a life mentality," she says. "What's holding these people back? It's everything about their lives. That's why we like to call ourselves the 'Harvard for the bottom 1%.' The people who come here need a Harvard to teach them about life."

How do addicts and ex-cons, many of them illiterate, learn and "get better" without experts to teach them? Silbert has a simple answer: "Each one teach one." If you read at an eighth-grade level, you teach someone who reads at a sixth-grade level—

and that individual instructs someone who reads at a fourth-grade level. That goes for job training too. At Delancey Street Restaurant, chefs teach prep cooks, who in turn teach dishwashers. The ultimate goal is for all residents to graduate with a high-school equivalency degree and three marketable skills. By constantly teaching one another, residents learn a fundamental lesson: that they have something to offer. "They need to know that they are talented, that they can do anything anybody else can do," Silbert says.

At Delancey, which accepts no government money and has no grant-writing department, that's not feel-good therapy. "Our people are needed," says Silbert. "If our residents don't become talented very quickly, then we don't eat." So far, that hasn't been a problem. Last year, the foundation's various enterprises took in \$9 million in revenues; corporate donations of products and individual financial contributions made up the rest of its \$12 million budget.

Delancey's Embarcadero Triangle headquarters is the program's most visible testament to Silbert's belief that the first step toward any accomplishment is acting as if you can do it. Some 300 inexperienced, formerly unemployable residents learned not only the building trades but also purchasing, contracting, and accounting skills. Together they created a graceful complex, complete with a swimming pool, a public restaurant, an espresso cafe, and a screening room.

Still, Silbert hasn't stopped looking for challenges. She is spearheading a group, commissioned by San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, that's charged with reinventing the city's juvenile-justice system. She's also spending time shuttling from cabinet offices in Washington, DC to corporate offices in the Bay Area to talk about juvenile-justice issues. Her goal: "If we can get gang people—who are the most racist, separatist, turf-oriented people in the world—to work together as a family, then we should be able to get bureaucracies and businesses to understand that kids at risk don't belong only to probation or only to police. They belong to everyone."



## EX-CON UNIVERSITY

**M**IMI SILBERT CALLS THE DELANCEY Street Foundation "a Harvard for the bottom 1%." And like any other great university, her organization benefits when its graduates go on to bigger things. Delancey "alumni" keep close ties to one another—and to their "alma mater."

Rick Mariano, 50 (above, left) and Lewis Lillian, 59 (above, right), became lifelong friends during their years at Delancey in the late 1970s. The two formed a close bond, when Mariano, a senior resident, served as "tribe leader" to Lillian, who had arrived with his life in a shambles because of drugs. Mariano, a recovering heroin addict, was responsible for keeping Lillian on track. "As tribe leader" he says "You're the first touch point for someone who may want to go back and shoot dope."

"We have a philosophy at Delancey—that A helps B, and A gets well," Lillian explains. Both he and Mariano benefited from that philosophy, and both now give back to Delancey every chance they get.

Today, as the director of real-estate investment for Richard C Blum & Associates, LP, a San Francisco-based billion-dollar merchant-banking firm, Mariano handles multimillion-dollar real-estate deals. He's also Delancey's dedicated real-estate broker. He got into real estate while at Delancey—when the foundation needed someone to handle the sale of a property it owned in Sausalito, California. Now, he says, "there isn't a time when I don't have at least one Delancey project on my desk."

When Mariano graduated from Delancey, Lillian took over his former tribe leader's role as the foundation's lobbyist to San Francisco City Hall. A few years after his graduation, Lillian joined then-Mayor Dianne Feinstein's staff. She appointed him to the city's housing authority, where he was able to help Delancey establish new locations.

Later, when Lillian moved on to work for Gannett, he convinced the media giant to give Delancey a \$200,000 grant. Why the fierce loyalty? "Delancey taught me to stand on my own two feet," says Lillian. "It's self-help in the truest sense of the word. I'm not going to forget where I came from."