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Making Rehabilitation Into a Serious Business

Programs: Delancy Street has empowered thousands of ex-cons, and it keeps on growing.

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SAN FRANCISCO—Mimi Silbert has spent her career cultivating a university of the streets, one she calls a Harvard for losers, a concrete campus where the students are former pimps and prostitutes, junkies and drug dealers, armed robbers and homeless waifs.

Since the 1970s, the smiling dynamo of a woman has operated Delancey Street, an alternative rehabilitation program run solely by its residents—one that proponents say has turned 14,000 multiple offenders and other societal castoffs into law-abiding, look-you-in-the-eye, self-respecting working people.

Silbert's secret has been to throw away the book on conventional "hold your hand" counseling and challenge her often functionally illiterate and unskilled wards to support themselves by helping to operate a dozen Delancey businesses, including a gourmet waterfront restaurant, a bookstore-cafe, a moving company and a catering center.

Starting from a single house, the 59-year-old criminal psychologist built a $20-million-a-year empire with locations in New York, New Mexico, North Carolina and Los Angeles—all, she says, without accepting a dime of public funds.

Mimi Silbert, program founder

'We all live together. We get along.'

Along with revenue from the businesses, the organization receives more than $10 million a year in donations.

Thursday night, as Delancey Street celebrated its 30th anniversary with a dinner honoring longtime supporter Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Silbert unveiled a new public-private partnership to take her rehabilitation formula nationwide.

Feinstein helped guide a $1-million grant to a national nonprofit foundation that will operate the program once Silbert finds sites to train a new generation of offenders to go into business for themselves.

"I've always wanted to take our model national, but I have never wanted to accept the government funding it takes to do it," Silbert said.

"But we've finally found the way: The money goes to the foundation. All we do is be ourselves, do what Delancey Street does."

Lynn Curtis, president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that coordinates social programs, said the U.S. Justice Department grant will be used to gather support for what he says is often perceived as an unorthodox program.

"You don't just go into a city and tell officials, 'Here we are. We can do this rehab thing better than you, so we're going to get to work turning convicts into entrepreneurs.'

"It takes time to win people over."

Organizers have identified possible sites ranging from Alaska to New England. The start-up drill will involve locating prison inmates who would make suitable Delancey Street clients.

Then they must persuade local judges to parole them into the program. They must develop a center and study which local enterprises can make the most money.

Silbert says she has resisted grant money in the past, fearing that participants might then stop feeling that their survival depends on the success of their business ventures.

"We're asking judges to buy into what they consider a risky arrangement—to see whether people who have constantly failed can finally put it all together," she said.

Silbert is familiar with such odds. Since she founded Delancey Street in 1972 with prison parolee John Maher, she has transformed a

fledgling program in which ex-cons are treated like family into a success story that has been praised by three former presidents—one that Feinstein calls "the best drug rehabilitation center that I know of."

In 1990, Silbert and her wards turned a city-leased 400,000-square-foot space in what was then a decrepit warehouse district along San Francisco's Embarcadero into a lavish residential and retail center that houses about 500 residents, along with several thriving inmate-run businesses.

The facilities, complete with a heath club, feel more like a hotel than an urban correctional center. The swimming pool is styled after one found at a Florida Four Seasons hotel, and the 150-seat cinema looks like a screening room at the Sundance Film Festival because the blueprint was donated by Robert Redford.

On a recent day, the center bustled as Delancey Street prepared for Thursday night's award dinner. Innocuous-looking men and women moved about—nearly all of them with drug or criminal histories. The chef is a former junkie, the waitresses armed robbers and the painters prostitutes.

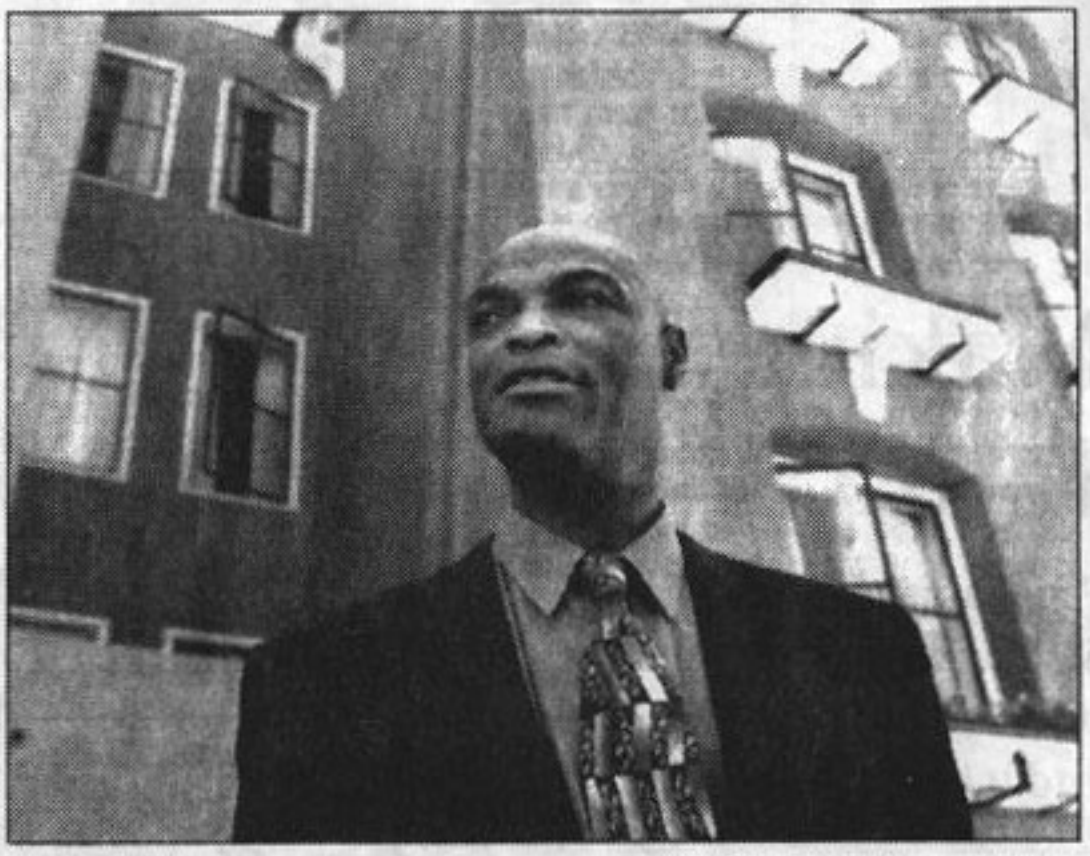
With her dog Amnesty at her side, Silbert attends to details with a breezy yet forceful personality that among her wards carries an almost cult-like attraction.

At Delancey Street, when Mimi Silbert talks, everyone listens.

Wearing stylish clothes donated by businesses such as Brooks Brothers and the Gap, many of Silbert's most-trusted helpers resemble Fortune 500 employees rather than prison parolees and former junkies.

In a show of solidarity, Silbert also wears donated clothes and lives in a one-bedroom apartment at the center, which she and co-founder Maher named after New York's Delancey Street, where many Jewish immigrants, including Silbert's parents, once settled.

"I'm surrounded by ex-prison gangsters, Mexican Mafia men and Aryan Brotherhood types who used to hunt Jews. And now we all live together. We get along," she says.



ROBERT DURELL / Los Angeles Times

Gerald Miller has spent 10 years at Delancey Street, earning a degree from a local college. He hopes for a job in sales.

Though most participants are prison parolees, some have walked in off the street. The center won't accept sex offenders or psychiatric patients and strongly enforces three rules: No violence. No threats. And no drug or alcohol abuse.

Many study in general education classes taught by program veterans. They learn job skills and tips on dealing with the public, and are encouraged to attend the opera and symphony.

Most are placed in outside jobs when they graduate, after an average of four years—moving on to become truck drivers, lawyers, even a deputy sheriff.

"Even if you don't know much, there's always someone who knows less," said resident Gerald Miller. "If you can read at an eighth-grade level, you can teach someone how to read at a fifth-grade level."

Miller is one of Silbert's prize students. Lanky and well-spoken, his head shaved, he's Michael Jordan-smooth in his dark suit. The only sign of a troubled past is a scar running along his neck—a legacy of the 102 stitches he received following a knife fight while doing time in Folsom Prison.

The 45-year-old New York City native says he had never worked a job in his life before coming to Delancey Street. He's served three prison stints totaling 15 years, once sent back only after 30 days on the street.

"I only knew prison," he says, "that ugly upside-down place where the nastier you are, the more you get along."

At Delancey Street, where he has spent 10 years, he has received a degree from a local college and wants to pursue a sales career.

Miller has a car, a girlfriend and, now, a future. "If it weren't for this place," he says, "I'd be dead today."