

*Mimi Silbert is the muse, the founder, the brilliance, behind the Delancey Street Foundation, a residential education center where hard-core felons, substance abusers, and other lost souls can find their humanity and reconstruct their lives.*

## Mimi Silbert

*Who is this small, fast-talking powerhouse of a woman, this ferocious lioness? This woman who is able to face down, mentally and emotionally, a part of society given up for lost and wrestle them back to life? For thirty-five years she has been committed to the process she began to develop in a little clinic she set up while getting her doctorate in criminology at Berkeley. She was also working as a prison psychologist at the time, and she realized that traditional therapy didn't work for people who are in prison. Everything they did was self-destructive. Their behavior had to change radically and quickly. The basic premise of the clinic was that anybody who came for help had to do something to help someone else.*



*Mimi met John Mahar, who had heard about the clinic. While his background was the polar opposite of hers—Mimi describes herself as a misfit in the good-girl world, John was a brilliant, charismatic eighth-grade dropout—they shared similar ideas and ultimately decided to work together. The first center opened in the heart of elegant Pacific Heights in San Francisco, California, initially much to the ire of its neighbors.*

*Mimi and I are in a meeting room in the block-square residential complex located on prime Embarcadero real estate that since 1990 has housed residents, a moving company, and a host of rent-paying tenants. It is the most beautiful place along the waterfront, and people constantly inquire about purchasing or renting to live there. Mimi says to them, "Oh, I'm sorry, but you haven't screwed your life up enough!"*

*The miracle of this place is that it was built from the ground up by the residents, and its living area, restaurants, and moving company all are run solely by them. There is no staff, salaries, funding, or cost to taxpayers. Everything is self-generated. No matter how often I'm at the restaurant, I am always moved by the young men and women in their crisp white shirts, all residents, tending to the guests. Regardless of how far down they have been, they have risen to the best in themselves through the hard work of the program. As I waited for Mimi earlier, her banquet manager came in to set up a repast for us to enjoy while we talked. A feeling of caring was in his every move as he set down Mimi's favorite cup and thoughtfully arranged the platters. Mimi and I have known each other for many years. After our usual hugs and greetings, I ask her about the most adventuresome thing she has done, and her preamble leads to an unusual story.*

**"I CAME FROM A LUSTY, LOVING IMMIGRANT FAMILY.** My dad was a person of great love. When you were around him, he was able to reflect to you how wonderful you were—anyone who was around him, he found their strengths and loved them for it. I grew up with that love.

**"Yiddish was my first language.** My mother was born in Lithuania and went through seven pogroms. The whole family was separated many times. My father had similar experiences in Poland and Russia. For the first twelve years of my life we lived in a little flat in a multi-ethnic ghetto in Boston. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, all my family came, the idea being that everyone would help each other. My family had

struggled so much to get to America and had succeeded, so I grew up with the idea that struggle was a good thing.

"Eventually we moved. My dad had a little drugstore, my mother kept the books, and after school I was the soda jerk. I was a secret misfit, more on the inside than the outside. My life had been made easy by the struggles of my family, so I felt that doing well in school was a small thing to give back. I have the deepest respect for people who are willing to struggle for values, for goodness, decency, and integrity.

"I've always been a little itchy and outraged, I will never have peace of mind. I was able to be a very independent-minded kid because I was standing on the shoulders of complete security and love, although at the time I thought it was smothering.

"So there I was, eventually, married to a wonderful guy in a happy, comfortable life with a perfect job, feeling how nice it was to do good, and I told my husband that what was missing for me was struggle. It took a few years, but as the ideas that John and I were working on at Delancey Street grew, I told my husband that I had to do this—I had to leave—and while he didn't like it, he understood that I was driven.

"Also, money made me uncomfortable, because I was brought up to almost admire the poor, and it took me a long time to understand there is no nobility in being poor. So I moved into Delancey Street, taking our twin sons with me when they were about two years old, and that's where they grew up. It wasn't the world they would've had if I hadn't chosen to do this. For me it was the right decision, but I think my kids suffered in ways they might not have, and they sacrificed a lot. They're in their late thirties now. Both have become lawyers doing good work, and they are the anchors of my life. They have also given me four incredible grandchildren.

"You asked me what I learned from having children. The fact is that I continue to learn from my children—they are the people I trust most when I am not sure about something. They were always wiser than I am and still are.

"At one point I couldn't resist looking at their college essays, the part where you write your autobiography—and, believe me, I was steeled for the worst. Both began with 'I had an odd upbringing' and told stories that showed they had learned to be loving human beings, giving, moral, ethical, caring, and compassionate. All the things you could've ever wanted, what we were aiming for with the residents, they got by example. They learned about taking risks, that failure is just a step on the way to success. Here they were living with these huge forty-year-old guys who were just learning to read and write, and they could appreciate both their struggles and accomplishments. They worked hand-in-hand with the residents on the construction project and in the

restaurant and understood intuitively that there is no separation between people. The residents were as much their friends as were their schoolmates from the fifth and sixth grade. I just wept. All during those years I was waiting for them to rebel because that's what I'm good at, and it finally dawned on me that they had rebelled by being good.

"Here we teach that we need each other. Our people come in unbelievably racist, they're all in gangs by race and have sworn to kill other races. It's fascinating to me, because my parents were persecuted for being Jewish, and one of the big groups among white prisoners are the Nazis. They come in here with swastikas all over them. I remember a guy sitting down and saying to me that his life had been to find Jews and blacks and kill them. He said, 'What are you going to do to me when you know what I have done?' I looked at him and said, 'I'm going to do the worst thing I can possibly do. I'm going to forgive you.' And he just wept. I said, 'You are going to tell me every last thing, and you are going to be sorry for it, but we are here together and we need each other. This is our family and we can't be mad at each other. And we for sure can't kill each other. We're all we have.'

"It's been years of all these gangs killing each other based on what block they live on, what color, what group. One day I realized what I've recreated here is this close, old-fashioned, ethnic American family where everybody knows too much about each other—we're in each other's business all the time. Just like it was in my neighborhood growing up. I am a parent, bringing people up again who didn't learn how to make life work for them.

"We are a huge family. We don't have much money—we pool everything and take care of each other because we don't believe in hiring baby-sitters! Aside from helping people change, there is a point to prove. People who are considered the problem have within them everything that's needed to become the solution. In order to find your own strengths, there has to be the weight of responsibility and ownership on you.

"Our average resident is a third-generation serious drug addict, gang member, criminal, coming from many generations of poverty. They have grandmothers yelling at them to come back into the life. Hope is not something they understand—they are angry beyond caring and despair. They may say they want to change, but how? It's like asking them if they want to eat some food they've never heard of. And, God, it's so phenomenal to see the day, it always happens, that a resident says, 'You know, I've been saying what you tell me to this guy you put me in charge of. Truth is I just didn't give a shit because I don't care about nobody. And today I ran into him, and all of a sudden I looked at him, and it meant I cared. That's the first I've cared about anybody.'

"That's when they start to hope they can be different, that they can be decent. Act as if you care, eventually you'll care. Go talk to the new people, help them, forget about yourself. It's all about A helps B, A gets better. B helps C, B gets better. Get out there and give, focus outside yourself. I'm always saying, 'You have to take the hardest thing for you and do and do it.' When I was working on the construction of the building and had to figure out mechanical problems, it was hell—and critical for me to do it. To take something I was bad at and conquer it enough to make it work and not be afraid to look stupid."

*As Mimi continued to tell me stories of the residents' lives, I found myself stunned into silence from the intensity of it all. I asked her how she kept from constantly crying, and she responded that she wept all the time. She talked about having to practice her own philosophy while dealing with the painful loss of her father and John Mahar, which left her immobilized and numb.*

"I was trying to be strong and hold it together, be positive, and as I was listening to someone's story, my feeling just came flooding back. I got up in front of everyone and said, 'This is everything I am feeling and I am not at my best, but you aren't at your best and I ask everything of you, so who the hell am I to think my pain is so special?'"

*Our conversation about losing loved ones turned to growing in age and media interpretations of the subject.*

"Recently I was talking to my sons about someone, and they said to me, 'How old is he, Mom?' And I said, 'He's our age.' And they said, 'Mom, you and we are not the same age.' And I was stunned for a moment, because when I talk to them I feel like we're the same age, but I guess it's true—my sons are younger than I am!

"I was very busy on my life's mission. My dad had been ill, and people my age were starting to talk about retirement. With the deaths of people who were so important in my life I realized that my independence relied on everybody else believing in me. Age had not meant much, but reaching sixty meant something. What I know now is that you have to experience something to know it—you have to live through it. I used to think being sixty meant maturity, accepting things, being reasonable, having more peace of mind, but those things will never happen for me. I was odd at twenty and will

be odd at eighty. I don't understand the concept of retiring to do the things you want to do. It's about laughing and playing, loving everything you do. I love being on the precipice with this huge family and constantly figuring out new things, not knowing what I am going to need to know. I just feel so lucky to be living in a community that is a 'we.' There is no 'I' in any of our lives.

"You asked me about my image of myself at this stage of life. I remember my Mom saying, 'You're going out on a date—put on some lipstick,' and my saying, 'But he asked me out without my wearing lipstick and I refuse to wear it.' You know I wear no jewelry. I don't know how to put on makeup. I know how to take it off the residents when they have it caked on. But now as I'm getting older, I'm putting on lipstick, or I think maybe I ought to cut my hair. I actually look in the mirror and think, What is this neck? I'm not supposed to have this neck! So it took the media a very long time to reach somebody like me. For years I never gave a damn, then I did, and now I have come full circle not to give a damn. I have earned this neck screaming at the residents. This is my face, my height, and these are my thighs, and they will never get long and thin. Screw it! It's never been about that, and it would be absurd for it to be about that now."

*Delancey Street expanded its reach, and for the past eight years has run a charter school for Juvenile Justice kids out on Treasure Island. Exposed to the same formula that worked for adults, the students learned an entire year of academics through a project-based curriculum that revolved around renovating the first building for their school and adding an additional 25,000 square feet. The students also run the only restaurant on the island. Graduates come back to help new students. They tell them, "I built this roof. I built this room. I painted this wall." Needless to say, there is no graffiti here.*

"We have five Delancey Streets around the country now," says Mimi, "and I can't do any more and keep that family feeling. But we have been inundated with requests from all over the world, so I finally decided to try to teach the model to other people.

"It takes a long time. I have based it on what I call the 1950s dating model—the slow dating process. We get to know each other and can part company before we get too far along. If we think they are going to 'get it' after a lot of travel back and forth we get 'pinned.' If that goes okay, we get engaged, and if all goes well we ultimately get

married! We have many states and countries in various stages, but we have married with Virginia, Alaska, Hawaii, Singapore, lots and lots of places, some faith-based, some business organizations.

"I am trying to teach it from all angles, although each organization has a residential facility. In fact, a wonderful developer used our basic principles to build an entire community, and they did phenomenal things. The replications cannot use our name, but after they complete our program they are awarded a letter indicating that they are a replication of the Delancey Street Foundation."

*Thousands of lives have been turned around due to the efforts of Delancey Street. With passion, caring, and commitment it's incredible what a difference one person can make. No doubt about it, Mimi Silbert will leave this world a better place for her efforts.*