

MIMI SILBERT



On Giving Second Chances

Mimi Silbert

As a national expert on criminal justice, Mimi Silbert's passionate drive helped turn the Delancey Street Foundation into a highly successful, self-sustaining rehabilitation program for ex-convicts and former homeless. It has five centers nationally.

➔ delanceystreefoundation.org

I grew up in the 1940s on Yiddish phrases and good Jewish cooking. Mine was an extended immigrant family for whom dinner table conversation revolved around how to make the world better. My parents had very traditional values: to love and support each other, to get educated, and to help others.

When my family moved from a small, working-class community to a more financially secure one, I watched as some of my friends from the old neighborhood struggled. My loyalty to those kids is probably the most immediate reason why I became interested in criminology—the inequity really irked me. I knew those kids who ended up in prison. I knew they had good hearts. They just got dealt a bad hand.

As a young psychologist working as a therapist in prisons, I decided that self-help was an answer to the problem of chronic criminals. I felt terrific because I was helping people. One day it struck me that everyone should feel that way. No one should be in the position of only receiving, because it would make you powerless, useless, and give you a victim's view of life.

In 1971 Delancey Street began with four residents, a thousand-dollar loan, and a dream to develop a model to turn around the lives of long-term substance abusers, the hardcore homeless, former felons, and others who had hit bottom by empowering them to become



FACT

Delancey Street's 1,000 participants are three-fourths male. About 60% come from the criminal-justice system as parolees, and about one-third have been homeless. Delancey Street runs at no cost to the taxpayer or the resident; instead, the organization generates revenue through operating twelve businesses, including a restaurant, bookstore, private car service, landscaping service, screening room, digital print shop, and moving services.

their own solution. We have taken in representatives of our society's most serious social problems as residents and, by a process of each one helping another, we have been solving the problems of poverty, illiteracy, lack of job skills, substance abuse, gangs, criminal behavior, homelessness, teen pregnancy, and every kind of abuse.

After an average of four years, our residents gain academic education, three marketable skills, accountability, responsibility, dignity, decency, and integrity. We have successfully graduated more than 15,000 people from America's underclass into society as successful, taxpaying citizens leading decent, legitimate, and productive lives. Our residents learn vocational skills through our training schools, which include a restaurant, a catering business, a moving and trucking school, furniture and woodwork production, and Christmas tree sales and decoration. They manage these income-producing enterprises so successfully that they earn sixty-five percent of the Foundation's entire working capital.

The entire Delancey Street organization is run completely by the former homeless and ex-convicts. We function as an extended family. Our daily operations are not funded, and we charge no fees. We pool all our resources. No one draws a salary, including me. There is no staff. The residents themselves run it, and we all live together. (I've raised my children at Delancey Street.) Everyone is both a giver and a receiver in an "each-one-teach-one" process. We believe that the best way to learn is to teach, and that helping others is an important way to earn self-reliance. Person A helps person B, and person A gets better. No one can undo the past, but we can balance the scales by doing good deeds and earning back our own self-respect, decency, and a legitimate place in mainstream society.



Despite the successes at Delancey Street, I have seen changes for the worse as well. There are more gangs on the street and in prisons; there is more fear and more anger among the citizenry; mobility is harder to achieve for those stuck on the bottom. While world poverty and hunger are certainly overwhelming, we must not forget that in our own backyard poverty, violence, hatred, and homelessness are growing.

One of the most important things that people can do is to hire those who have overcome homelessness, poverty, and past crimes. The residents at Delancey Street gain vocational, personal, interpersonal, and social skills necessary to make restitution to the society from which they have taken illegally, and often brutally, for most of their lives. In return, we ask from society access to the legitimate opportunities from which the majority of the underclass and ex-convicts have been blocked for most of their lives.




I ask that people not let fear lead them to exclude people from their lives. We need to include the underclass and people different from us. We need to connect with each other. If we need each other, we all feel better. We find strength. Problems turn into solutions. Fear and hatred turn to support and love.

HOW TO... SOME TIPS ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE





TIME

-  **Make an educated decision about where you stand on the death penalty.** Find a local group that works with prisoners and their families in your community. Use your voice to lobby, vote, and influence your legislators to help sway the country's position on capital punishment.
-  **Research the issues.** The gun debate is greatly influenced by opposing advocacy groups that can make it difficult to form a clear opinion. By understanding the laws and their consequences, you can vote to change legislation more effectively.
-  **Report a possible weapon threat at school** if you (or your children) have heard classmates talking about it. In three out of four campus shootings, the attackers told other students before they inflicted violence. Call the 1-866-SPEAK-UP hotline to make an anonymous, free report or visit www.speakup.com.
-  **Download a Missing Children screensaver or poster.** Help find missing children using the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's database of photographs. By signing up at www.missingkids.com you can volunteer to expand the search by distributing posters or downloading a computer screensaver that updates automatically with the latest available information.




ITEMS

-  **Donate books.** Many prisons lack basic dictionaries and encyclopedias. Send your old volumes to programs such as the Women's Prison Book Project, Midwest Pages to Prisoners, and UC Books to Prisoners to provide people in prison and prison libraries with additional educational resources and reading material.
-  **Give away your used vehicle to a crime victims organization.** Check to see if the organization such as the National Center for Victims of Crime (www.ncvc.org) can handle the donation. It can be a good way of helping them raise funds for helplines and other necessary services and programs. Consult the Guide to Donating Your Car at Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.com) for more information.
-  **Trade in toy weapons for non-violent playthings.** Organize an anti-violence event that lets children and parents in your community exchange toy guns for books or other non-violent items. Use it as a forum to start a discussion about what can be done to prevent violence at schools and in your neighborhood.

EXPERTISE

-  **Research safety tips for firearms.** Forty percent of U.S. homes with children have firearms. If you or someone you know keeps a gun in the house, learn to store them safely, keep them unloaded, and locked separately from ammunition.
-  **Train to be an auxiliary police volunteer.** Auxiliary police assist police departments by performing patrols, and providing additional support in event of disasters. As a volunteer you undergo intense training to observe and report conditions that require police services.
-  **Mentor or tutor children with incarcerated parents.** With one or both parents in jail, these kids are one of the biggest populations of at-risk youth in our society. The Community Service Society (www.cssny.com), through its Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, mentors children with incarcerated parents, while programs such as the Words Travel Family Connection and the Storybook Project work with prisoners to provide their children the gift of a book and a recording of the parent reading the book aloud.
-  **Become a crime victim advocate.** Provide crisis intervention, support, and advocacy to victims of crime and/or their families and friends by training to handle victim hotlines. Contact your local victims' centers to find out how you can help.

DOLLARS

-  **Fund a scholarship for children from disadvantaged families or foster care.** Education and expanded opportunities can help at-risk youth avoid a path that might eventually lead to violence, arrest, or incarceration.
-  **Make a donation to support programs for ex-offenders.** Delancey Street Foundation (www.delanceystreetfoundation.org) and the Doe Fund (www.doe.org) rehabilitation programs work to provide support, resources, and job training to the formerly incarcerated in order to empower them to become independent and self-reliant.
-  **Hire a formerly incarcerated youth or adult.** Keep an open mind. Evaluate each job applicant on their individual merits and don't make a blanket judgment based on a conviction. Job discrimination is one of the many barriers faced by those seeking to reenter society.