

# The Mimi Silbert story

## Re-cycling ex-cons, addicts and prostitutes

By Jerr Boschee and Syl Jones

### PROLOGUE

*They call themselves “human garbage” . . .*

*Burglars, car thieves, armed robbers, pushers, prostitutes, even murderers. Only sex offenders are not welcome. They come to Delancey Street with an average of 18 felony convictions, seven years in prison and no better than an eighth grade education. Most are illiterate, and few have ever held a skilled job for more than a few months. More than 85 per cent have been heroin addicts for an average of ten years, and better than 60 per cent have abused two or more drugs. They range in age from 18 to 68, are equally divided between African Americans, Latinos and Anglos, and one-fourth are women.*

*It’s a recipe for disaster, especially since Delancey Street uses no staff counselors, no social workers and no paid professionals -- the traditional gurus who speak the language of social and psychological pathology.*

*“These are people who have really hit bottom,” says Mimi Silbert, who’s led the organization since she and John Maher started it in 1971. “They’re angry and hopeless . . . and they hate everybody. They hate each other and they hate themselves. But it doesn’t matter to us what they’ve done. We take the people everybody else thinks are losers . . . our only criteria is that they want to change badly enough.”*

*The residents stay at Delancey Street for an average of four years and soak up an education that spans vocational, cultural and social training. The “professors” are the reformed convicts and junkies themselves . . . and not all of them make it. The attrition rate is 35 per cent, but, as Silbert says, “Delancey Street attracts the worst of the worst, and some people just aren’t ready to make the kind of commitment we make here.”*

*Each resident is required to earn a high school equivalency degree and learn three marketable skills. One must involve physical labor such as construction, moving or automotive; another must be accounting- or secretarial- or computer-related; and, finally, every resident is exposed to people occupations such as waiting tables or doing sales. Once they’ve experienced all three, residents are free to major in one of them.*

*Delancey Street has never sought philanthropic or government support. Most of its annual operating budget of \$24 million comes from the profits generated by more than 20 businesses, each of which doubles as a training school. Approximately 1,500 residents live in five facilities around the United States, including a spectacular residential and retail complex on San Francisco’s waterfront (built by the residents themselves), a ranch in New Mexico, a castle in rural New York, and facilities in Los Angeles and North Carolina.*

*To date, Delancey Street has graduated more than 12,000 people, many of whom have gone on to become lawyers, doctors, teachers, police officers, business owners, firefighters, electricians, mechanics, contractors, salespeople . . .*

*And, after all these years, the organization is still led by a 95-pound dynamo who stands less than five feet tall, her hands and arms constantly moving, emotions racing across her tanned and weathered face . . .*

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## “WHATEVER WILL HURT THE MOST . . . ”

Mimi Silbert is a realist.

“You don’t do this and not get burned,” she says. “Repeatedly. The people who come here are self-destructive. They’re nasty, vicious, violent, greedy, take-and-run users.

“My job is to be the chief believer, to believe in them when they don’t believe in themselves . . . but that means they go out of their way to prove to me how wrong I am . . . because they’re scared pissless that they don’t have it . . . and that if they ever really try, they won’t make it anyway . . .

“So everything in them wants to prove it’s all bullshit, and they do everything they can to betray my belief in them. Sometimes that self-destructiveness wins, and they’ll choose the meanest thing they can think of to hurt me . . . whatever it is I’ve been begging them to do, or yelling at them to do, that’s what they’ll say to me on their way down and out, whatever will hurt the most.”

Then her passion fills the room.

“But I *deal* with it . . . because there have been thousands more that are the opposite . . . and the courage it takes for them to succeed is so much greater than the courage it takes for somebody like me to say, ‘Yeah, somebody burned me.’ That’s the business I’m in. Get over it, honey. It isn’t easy, but it’s what you have to do. It isn’t easy to change their lives. It isn’t easy for me, either. I cry, I get depressed, but I choose to remain naive. It is my choice in life to insist upon always believing in the best of everybody . . . because I’ve seen the most incredible people at the bottom rise to become the absolute best of themselves.

“I don’t mean they have to become lawyers or something. I mean, we have people who were such dirtbags in the past and they have gained integrity. Yeah, they make a good living, they do well, many of them. But they are so decent and helpful to others. That’s what’s really important . . . ”

She pauses, catching her breath, and after a quiet moment she looks up and says: “I guess when I think about it, what happens here at Delancey Street is that I’m the role model for the residents when they first come here. Then, later, they become *my* role models.”

## THE HALPERS

And Mimi Silbert remembers.

Every day, before dinner, she and her parents would gather around the radio for the news of the day. If they heard about three boys stealing from an elderly woman, her parents would “go from saying, ‘Imagine, that poor little lady . . . ’ to ‘Imagine how miserable their lives must be for those kids to steal from a little old lady.’

“I was really lucky in the draw,” she says. “I had two of the most loving, supportive parents, and they had a deep sense of justice.” Born in 1942 and raised just outside Boston, she was the only child of Dena and Herbert Halper, European Jewish immigrants who came to America at the turn of the century, two of many who lived in tenements on the original Delancey Street on the lower east side of New York.

At Seder, a holiday usually reserved for family members, her father would invite poor strangers to their dinner table, and his generosity carried over to his business. He owned and operated a corner drugstore, where his daughter worked as a soda jerk. “I remember some old and poor people coming in,” she once told the *San Francisco Examiner*. “My father would say, ‘When they go to buy something, put it in a large bag, and when they go to the cash register, turn around and don’t look.’” Once, she turned and saw an older man dumping an aspirin bottle into his bag. She said, “Daddy, I think so-and-so is taking something,” and she remembers how angry he became. “He said, ‘I told you not to look. That man *needs* those things. Something is very wrong when he can’t buy them. We don’t want him to feel he’s taking charity. You’re not to turn around again because you’re not to make him feel bad.’

"I came of age in a place and time where the blacks spoke Yiddish," she recalls, "and the Jews spoke their own version of black Southern dialect. My dad came from Poland, my mom from Lithuania. My grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins lived with us because the idea was to help each other get up and out of the ghetto. Eventually, most everyone in that neighborhood went on to become doctors and lawyers. The level of loyalty and support was fantastic in those days. Not like it is today. It was an absolutely wonderful place to grow up," and Silbert has been working for nearly 30 years to create an organization that replicates the kind of neighborhood and the kind of upbringing she received as a child.

In high school, Silbert became a cheerleader . . . who read Dostoyevsky when she wasn't doing flips. She was voted "nicest girl" in her high school class, an "honor" she found so humiliating that "right afterwards, I taught myself how to swear."

While still in high school, she began helping kids in trouble, and she continued reaching out during her years at the University of Massachusetts. One day she went to a local drugstore for an ice cream sundae and "found a kid who hung around there who clearly should have been in school. I started talking to him and, sure enough, he was cutting school. I slowly worked with him. I figured out what was wrong. I brought him back to school, went to see his family and patched things up. There was a lot of hostility going on in the house. No one even knew he had dropped out of school." Some years later, her dropout graduated from MIT.

After college, Mimi studied under the famous existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris. From him she learned "there is no given meaning to life, that you have to *make* that meaning . . ."

Later, at the University of California at Berkeley, she earned a double doctorate in psychology and criminology and then taught at Berkeley and San Francisco State. She became a consultant to prisons, mental health programs, halfway houses and police departments. By 1971 she was married and raising twin sons.

## ENTER THE EX-CON

That's when she was approached by an ex-con named John Maher, a recovering alcoholic and heroin addict who had served prison time for what Silbert describes as a series of petty crimes. He suggested they set up a self-supporting rehab center for ex-cons, an idea Silbert had also been considering.

Maher argued that traditional rehab programs don't work, that it takes an ex-addict to understand the gut-wrenching pain of quitting heroin cold turkey, the misery of shivering in an alley on a winter night, the wasted hours behind prison walls. It takes an ex-con to see through all the sob stories, the excuses for wrongdoing.

And there *are* excuses. "When they come in here," says Silbert with a laugh, "they have it down. They know when to cry, 'I'm so *hostile*, I don't wanna be *hostile* no more . . .' and then we say, 'Cut the crap . . .'"

Silbert and Maher discussed the possibility of ex-cons and addicts not only living together and helping one another off drugs, but also teaching each other how to get a high-school diploma or college degree, learn a legitimate trade, hold a job and, most importantly, develop self-esteem. The organization would be run like a family, with a combination of entrepreneurial zeal and old-fashioned tough-mindedness. Residents who'd been in the program the longest would guide and discipline the newer arrivals, who in turn would do the same for the next residents. Rather than depending on government handouts, participants would earn their keep and become hard-working, tax-paying citizens.

Silbert and Maher started Delancey Street soon afterwards by borrowing \$1,000 from a loan shark. Ten recovering addicts and one criminal psychologist all crowded into a cramped, one-bedroom apartment, an unorthodox combination of residential center and entrepreneurial incubator. "It was heaven," Mimi told *People* magazine in 1998. She divorced her first husband, Ken Silbert, and became romantically involved with Maher. "We got the opportunity to fall in love," she said, "and also to make the thing we'd dreamed about come true." Maher, Silbert and her sons David and Greg lived at Delancey Street and treated the ex-cons as an extended family. David told *People*, "I thought everyone had former pimps and prostitutes picking them up at school . . ."

In 1985, Maher, who had resumed drinking, left Delancey Street, and in 1988 he died of a heart attack. Since then, Silbert has expanded the organization's operations. "I absolutely adore my life," she says. "For 29 years I've seen the lowest 10 per cent come through the door . . . but a few years later, strong, decent human beings walk out . . ."

## **"RUNNING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION . . ."**

Seventy percent of the residents come to Delancey Street as an alternative to prison or a condition of parole, the rest from the street. And the letters from applicants never cease: "I have watched helplessly as my brother's life slowly drains from his very being" . . . "When not high on drugs, my husband is a caring, loving father" . . . "I thought maybe here was a place that could help our son." Unfortunately, because of space limitations, Silbert has to turn down 90 per cent of the applicants: "There are ten people waiting," she says, "for every one of our beds."

Some of those who arrive are still hooked on drugs, but Delancey Street doesn't treat addiction. Silbert says, "we just tell our new residents that 'from this day forward, you will use no more drugs. We have no idea why you can't use them and some other people can. But *you* can't, because you'll go all the way down . . . so you'll never use them again.'" She and the other residents let the addicts "dry out on our living room couch with a lot of chicken soup and a lot of love. As soon as they're slightly bleary-eyed we'll stand them up, put a broom in their hands and try to get them to function."

Once they're on their feet, the residents begin a regimen of thrice-weekly rap sessions and a daily routine of work, meetings and seminars, all of them led by other residents. "The people who'd be considered patients elsewhere are in charge here," says Silbert.

But that doesn't seem strange to Silbert, because she's "always liked criminals. I like their energy, their . . . it's all ass-backwards, see, but at least they're active about life. They're charging, headlong . . . they're all just running in the wrong direction. But they do have energy. They have loyalty. They haven't just given up and gone inward and died with their nightmares. They're punching out. They're doing it wrongly, but at least it's a sign of life."

Silbert believes it's paradoxical to attempt to confer self-reliance and self-respect on people through a staff of experts, no matter how highly trained they may be. Therefore, Delancey Street has no staff, and the rules of living apply equally to everyone, including her. Although she has never had a problem with alcohol, she gave up drinking wine. "I don't drink any more because we don't drink," she says.

Despite their long and brutal histories, residents have never committed a single act of violence after they've begun their stay at Delancey Street, and there haven't been any arrests. No external controls, weapons or drugs are used. Peer pressure is a powerful deterrent, and the residents use negative sanctions, positive rewards and role modeling to support each other. According to them, getting through Delancey Street is tougher than surviving prison. "In jail you're responsible for nothing," says Silbert. "At Delancey Street you're responsible for everything you do. It doesn't matter why you were an addict or a burglar. What matters is that you believe in your ability to change all that."

## **THE DELANCEY STREET PHILOSOPHY**

Delancey Street is actually a replica "of the neighborhood I grew up in," says Silbert. "It's based on the two models I learned in childhood . . . the extended family model, where people learn to be dependent on each other while they develop their identities and their independence, and the education model.

"I came from immigrant parents who, you know, everything is 'the children, the children, the children' . . . the American dream, the children will do everything. I was an overachiever. I went to school to get *extra* degrees. I had to get two masters and two doctorates . . . you know, absurd, but that's what I knew how to do. I knew how to go to school and how to teach school."

Silbert says she tried desperately in the early part of her career, as a criminologist and psychologist, to change the lives of people she believes never escaped the ghetto. "They've been stuck there for generations," she says, "and they hate everybody who got out.

"So I was training police. I was training probation officers. I was desperately running around trying to find a way to change the lives of the people who didn't get out like I did. And everybody was saying, 'You're so wonderful.' I felt terrific because I was always helping people.

"Then one day it struck me that *everybody* should feel that way. No one should be in the position of only receiving. That would tend to make you violent and depressed or give you a victim's view of life. We're all entitled to give in to being victimized and feeling victimized and getting bitter and not trusting and all of that -- *but none of us should!* It takes us down and it takes down the people around us and it makes society move backwards. The victim mentality is death . . ."

Silbert believes that being an insider within the California Prison System forced her to explore the role of the militant outsider.

"If you spend any time at all in prison," she says, "and you have a job like mine, to be a prison psychologist and turn people's lives around, you find out it isn't therapy they need. Therapy doesn't change behavior all that much. You change your behavior by changing your behavior . . . and awareness doesn't necessarily lead to a different behavior."

During those years, "at the end of the day, a lot of people would say to me, 'thank you, thank you, thank you, you've meant so much to me,' and I would finish my day and say "what a good girl Mimi is" because I was helping so many people and, you know, doing what I was brought up to do with my life. And it really wasn't until a few years went by that it struck me one day: Who wants to be on the other side of that? Who wants to be the person that says about her life, 'Thank *you* so much, *you* did so much for *me*, the asshole.'

"Nobody should be only a receiver. If people are going to feel good and be accomplished and be part of something, they have to be doing something they can be proud of. We ought to set it up as a circle, so you're always receiving and giving simultaneously. That's really the only way to become somebody, and *everybody* wants to become somebody. For this group of people, the only place they *are* somebody is in a gang or in prison or in the anti-world they've set up. So if we want them to be pro-society, then we ought to set up the vehicles that help them be somebody in more traditionally socially positive ways.

"You know," she says, "there are plenty of middle-class and wealthy people who commit horrible crimes, but they aren't filling up the jails. We as a society are not mad at them. We're mad at this underclass because they are disgusting and violent and vicious and nasty and stupid and ignorant and mean.

"They *are* all of these things. But no one has helped them *not* to be. If we're ever going to solve social problems, we have to teach them to be decent, to have integrity, to be kind, compassionate, forgiving. We have to teach them how to be productive, to take the same piece of pie that everybody else wants to take . . . and take it legitimately.

"These people are just as capable as anybody else out there. Just because they haven't learned in traditional ways doesn't mean they *can't* learn . . . and we'll keep looking for non-traditional ways to help them until we succeed . . ."

## LIVING COMMUNALLY

Once they arrive, residents quickly learn about some of the core values that guide the people at Delancey Street.

To begin with, everybody's in it together.

"This is a new family," says Silbert. "We start all over again. We say, 'Yeah, those were all the things you were . . . but I'm not interested in that any more, because now we're going to teach you to care for other

people. Since we have no staff, we have to rely on you. You're going to have to take care of the person under you, and I'm going to teach you how to do it. And I know you won't care whether that person lives or dies, but you have to act as if you care because he's got nobody but you. And you've got nobody but the person right over you . . . and he doesn't know what he's doing either! So we have nobody to rely on but each other. It's up to you.

"And I say to them at the beginning, 'This is not *my* Delancey Street. I do not get paid a salary for doing this. We're climbing a mountain together. I'm at the top of the mountain. The newest person in the door is at the bottom. But we're holding hands. So if all of you are pulling downward, we'll all go down together. If all of us pull upward, we'll all go up together. But we're hanging in together. It's your organization. You want to tear it down, like you have everything else in your life, I'll take my doctorate degrees, I'll go out and earn a few hundred bucks an hour and you'll go out to shit. So don't do this for me. I'm willing to climb with you, but goddamn it we're walking this way and I'm not interested in being pulled down.'

"Our lives are very simple," she says. "If they don't learn to work, we don't eat. If we all want to eat, then we all have to learn how to work. Because that's what any family is like, bringing the money in -- us, all of us together."

So the residents pool their resources, "because, when you're poor, if you pool things, it turns out that together you have some power, you have some money. My check goes into the communal pot. Somebody else who can cook is the communal cook. Somebody else who figured out how to repair the roof became the communal head of construction. And all of us make an extended family."

## THE MINYAN

The emphasis on family begins on the first day of a resident's stay when he or she is placed in a group of ten people. "We call it a 'minyan,'" she says, "because in the Jewish religion, if you don't have a leader, it takes equal cooperation from ten people of good faith and you can call yourself a congregation. You don't need a rabbi or anything. The ten people become the rabbi. Those ten residents are taught to be responsible for one another instead of just themselves.

"So we have ten people who, of course, are sworn to kill each other, because there's a Mexican Mafia member in with a member of the Aryan brotherhood in with a . . . you know. They all don't just dislike one another, they *despise* everything about each other. And here they are in this little minyan and they have to work together. They sleep together in a crowded dorm . . . and all we want from them in those early days is the basics. Show up to work, which is simply pushing a broom. Try to do what you're told, try to get through the day, you know, no threats, no nastiness. And pretty soon they get tangled up with each other all day long, saying, 'What's going on here, he's got the good broom and I got the shitty broom! . . . people think I'm not working, but I'm working harder than he is! . . . you like him better, you gave him the good broom!'"

## CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES

Silbert believes it's important to not only put people in touch with the community they're comfortable with, "but all the ones they're uncomfortable with . . . you've got to teach them how to interact, how to get up out of their ghetto mentality and into the mainstream, how to deal with every race, every ethnic group, every kind of person, every skill.

"We celebrate every . . . you can't imagine how many liberation days there are. We get to know all the foods and we learn all about the cultures and the customs of everybody. It isn't just that the African Americans learn African American pride. Everybody learns that pride. And everybody learns. Thursday we're having a Seder . . . so everybody learns what it was like to escape from being slaves in Egypt. Then comes Cinco De Mayo. Everybody learns that story. And on and on.

"It isn't enough in life to just take care of yourself," she says. "We'll say to a resident, 'So you knew George was screwed up like that and thinking crazy and gonna die and you didn't give a shit? You didn't do

anything to help him?' Then we'll scream at that resident harder than we'll scream at George. This is about people helping each other. It isn't enough in life to take care of yourself. Life isn't just about you."

And she's proud of the results. "People end up so gentle with each other . . . at the same time they still haven't overcome all their own anger and hatred. Put someone under their care and watch them, you know, it's like giving things to a little bird . . ."

## SEX AND FRIENDSHIP

Living communally also means throwing hundreds of horny male residents into the same residence with hundreds of women, many of whom have been repeatedly raped or have developed destructive-seductive strategies for dealing with the men in their lives.

"It's our biggest problem," says Silbert, "the one addiction everybody has -- 'I'm not real good at relationships' . . . so we teach them, twenty-four hours a day.

"Most of the women, in addition to whatever else they've done, have also been prostitutes. They typically have one pattern . . . you know, do anything for any guy any time any place, and then he beats the shit out of them and that's what's supposed to happen. And then they'll do more for him . . ."

"So we set a period of time in which residents are not allowed to touch or even say, 'Hey, you and me baby, in six months.' It's like grammar school. Then it moves on to high school and, pretty soon, there's two women living in an apartment and two men next door. It's fascinating because most of the guys . . ."

Silbert pauses, tilts her head slightly and smiles. She gestures toward a tall African American man, calls him over and gives us, in her own matter-of-fact way, a thumbnail sketch of his background:

*Silbert:* Gerald was born in Spanish Harlem. He's an average resident in terms of the number of felonies committed, the number of years in prison. He's been here -- how long?

*Gerald:* Five, going on six, years.

*Silbert:* He's my administrative assistant. How old are you, Gerald?

*Gerald:* Forty.

*Silbert:* Most of the residents are in their thirties. Most of our male residents, like Gerald, have never slept with a woman without being loaded and have never gone out on a real date before they arrive here. So, we have all these archaic rules. You have to court each other, like in the olden days.

*Gerald:* (laughing) It's very uncomfortable. It's like being in a relationship and having fifty of your girlfriend's brothers and sisters monitoring you. You have to be nice, which is a learning process for everyone.

*Silbert:* They go for walks in the park, ice cream, movies . . .

*Gerald:* You start by going out in a group of people. Then, after a month, it progresses to 'relationship status' by mutual agreement. You say, 'I still like you. Do you still like me?' If you want to go beyond that point, you have to go before a council of your peers and tell them you want to pursue the relationship. You have to state your intentions . . .

*Silbert:* And they must be honorable!

It sounds suspiciously like an old Jewish family ritual, and Silbert explodes with enthusiasm. "Absolutely! It's all about learning. We do it openly, in groups, and everyone knows everything about everyone. We have no secrets from each other . . . and friendships are as big an issue as sexual relationships. The residents are worse at friendships than even the boy/girl thing."

Gerald agrees. He says the hardest part about living at Delancey Street was "learning to open up and allow myself to be close to someone. I'd never really trusted *anyone*. I came from an upside down world where the people closest to you were the ones who hurt you first. Here you just talk about things. I *never* talked about anything . . . and I used to be so far removed from everything that was decent. Delancey Street gave me a chance to get connected."

## CLIMBING THE LADDER

The fundamental philosophy at Delancey Street is simple: A helps B and A gets well. "If you read at an eighth-grade level," says Silbert, "you teach someone who reads at a sixth-grade level -- and that person teaches someone who reads at a fourth-grade level. You're always both a student and a teacher."

It's the same in the 20 businesses. "In our restaurant, for example, the chefs teach the prep cooks, and the prep cooks teach the dishwashers . . . you're just forever climbing a ladder."

Changing ladders, too. "As soon as you learn how to be a waiter," says Silbert, "we might move you into construction. We're always pushing you to the next uncomfortable level, trying to help you find your dream . . . become the type of person you want to be . . . sometimes it takes a long time, but you can find it if we move you around and let you try out different possibilities . . ."

By constantly teaching one another, Silbert says residents "learn a fundamental lesson . . . that they have something to offer. These are people who have always been passive. The bottom of society is passive. They receive everything. They receive welfare, never enough. They receive therapy, never enough. They receive punishment. But strength and power come from being on the giving end."

"I guess in some ways we take a revolutionary position," she says. "We believe there is enough for everybody in America . . . that the people on the bottom can learn to do everything that the people on the top are doing . . . and that they don't need billions of experts and dollars to teach them to do it. Nor do they need thousands of doctors. I mean there are people who are sick and they need doctors. There are people who need mental health care. But the majority of angry, screwed up people on the bottom can learn to make their way to the top."

## ACTING AS IF

But communal living and climbing the ladder aren't the only keys to the Delancey Street philosophy. There's another piece that's equally fundamental.

"Every minute of every day," says Silbert, "our residents are doing what we call 'acting as if' . . . they have to do things they don't know how to do . . . and that takes tremendous strength and courage."

She has enormous admiration for people who fight their way through the terrors of change. "They go through the tunnel," she says. "They're terrified to change. I mean, we're asking them to give up everything. All their self-destructive instincts tell them, 'March to the left, march to the left, march to the . . .' compulsively, over and over. And we're standing there saying, 'Come to the right, come to the right, come to the right.' And it takes tremendous courage to keep doing things that you don't know how to do."

"They have to act as if they care about each other. They have to be there for each other. They have to hold each other when the other person wants to give up. They have to talk that person into staying and believing when they don't believe themselves. They work all day at jobs they have no idea how to do, acting as if they do know how to do them. They have to get high school equivalencies and then take literature classes and art classes and go to museums and the opera and learn an entire world that they know nothing about . . . and they *do* it."

"If you don't have the stuff and you have to be on the giving end, the only way to do it is to 'act as if' you have those qualities. I believe that's how all the rest of us learned them to begin with. We were lucky to

learn them when we were three, four, five and six. We followed some kind of positive role model. And we pretended we were how they were . . . and then we became that.

“So that’s what we do here. I tell them to ‘act as if’ you are a businessman, and we put them in coats and ties. And pretty soon you become comfortable in that suit the same way you became comfortable with your tattoos and with that absurd walk that rolls the shoulders . . . that’s not a natural walk either. You have to pretend that walk first. And then you learn to do it.

“So we’re lucky in the fact that our people have hit bottom. We ‘act as if’ we are all the things we want to become. We ‘act as if’ we’re decent and caring and bright and talented. And we eventually become those things.”

## EXPOSING HER WEAKNESS

A good example is the process Silbert herself followed in the late 1980s when it came time to find a new home for Delancey Street in San Francisco . . . a project that led to construction of a 370,000-square-foot residential and retail complex on the Embarcadero.

She remembers that “everybody kept patting me on the head and saying, ‘You’ve certainly been very good at the things you’re doing, but construction, Mimi, is a very different thing’ . . . like we’re talking about brain surgery! So we had to become our own general contractors,” and that exposed one of her weaknesses.

“When I was in school,” she laughs, “I was a bright little girl. They used to give us all these aptitude tests and I was scoring in the 99-plus percentile . . . so that’s how I expected to score on everything!

“And then one day, in the sixth grade . . . I mean I can remember where I was standing when they gave us a mechanical aptitude test. I even remember pieces of the test. There were pictures of thumbs and you had to say whether the thumb came from a left hand or a right hand. Well, I was standing and turning this way and that -- but no one else was doing that! They were all sitting and . . .

“Well, it came back that I scored in the sixth percentile, and the teacher stood there, I can still remember her saying, ‘That means 94 per cent of the people in the United States are better at mechanical aptitude than you are.’ I just wanted to kill her. I was standing there saying to myself, ‘I *know* they are . . . *because I’m in the 99-plus percentile in math!*’

“Well, from that day until the day we had to build this place, I’d never looked at a machine or changed a light bulb. If you asked me to do anything like that, I’d say, ‘Oh, I can’t do that. I have no mechanical aptitude!’ And that would be the end of that.

“But then we didn’t have the money to buy a place, and we needed a big place, so we had to build. And there was me. I was pretty much going to have to come up with the design and learn to read the blueprints and become the general contractor and the developer. You know, I just sat there over and over saying, ‘I have no mechanical aptitude. Doesn’t anybody understand this?’

“And then, of course, I had to do what I make every resident do, find the thing that’s most uncomfortable and make a public ass of yourself while you learn to do it. And that’s what I did. I pretty much designed the building. I can’t tell you how long it took me to read those blueprints. I was like a crazy person. The guys in Delancey Street would have to sit with me until three in the morning because I’d do the design work and then I kept having to get up and walk around it. They’d all say, ‘See, there . . .’ and I’d go, ‘Which one is the apartment?’ . . . over and over, I kept walking and turning and looking and . . . I just didn’t get it. I publicly didn’t get it. Every week I had to stand up and announce how stupid I was.”

## RISK-TAKING

But even that experience taught Silbert a lesson. “If you’re going to become good at something, you have to take the kinds of risks that mean you’ll fail because you won’t know what you’re doing . . . that’s what a risk means, by definition.

“So you have to practice . . . with everybody watching. And then you eventually become good it . . . and you no longer have to *look* good because then you are good enough to say, ‘Oh, I made a mistake.’ You need to get rid of this false pride that says, you know, everything we do we have to succeed in right away. You have to have real confidence to say, ‘Oh, sorry. My mistake. I screwed that up. How can I fix it?’ Because if you believe *you* are a mistake, which is what our people believe about who they are, then you have to defend everything you do . . .”

## EARLY DAYS

The complex on the Embarcadero came years after the early days of struggle. By late 1972, the original ten ex-cons had grown to more than 100 and Delancey Street needed space. Silbert wanted her people far from the underworld of pushers and prostitutes.

So, while the group scrimped and saved, she and Maher came up with a find: A magnificent former Russian consulate in San Francisco’s fashionable Pacific Heights area. Delancey Street bought the mansion for \$160,000, with a small down payment and a big mortgage.

“It was huge,” she recalls. “Forty rooms -- but it wasn’t zoned correctly. It was still considered a private home, from the days of the robber barons. It clearly *wasn’t* a single home, but because the Russians had been using it, it never got re-zoned. And then it stayed empty for a few years, and it was kind of run down.

“We bought it and the neighborhood went completely crazy. I mean completely crazy. You know, it was 1972, and here came a hundred large, dark former criminals moving into this gorgeous mansion on the top of the hill in the nicest neighborhood. So the neighbors went nuts and they fought us . . . and we went out to win them over.

“We went from door to door in our . . . you know, we’re a very rigid organization . . . everybody is in a suit and tie with short hair . . . I always tell my friends in professional groups you’ll be able to distinguish the dope fiends from the professionals because we’re the ones in the coats and ties. So we went around offering our services, volunteering to do anything anybody wanted us to do just so they could get to know us. We wanted to prove we were going to be good neighbors.

“We re-did our building right away to show them that property values would go up . . . and we patrolled the neighborhood so crime would go down . . . because their fears were just the opposite . . . crime up and property values down. And we kept saying, ‘please get to know us . . . we’re going to be the best neighbors . . .’”

## THE FIRST BUSINESS VENTURE

And it was here that Silbert and the other residents stumbled onto their first business opportunity.

“One of the neighbors asked us to help them clear out their living room for a party. I was standing there when a resident picked up the grand piano and said, ‘What do you want me to do with this?’

“That’s when I went, ‘Boing, boing, boing, boing!’ We’re a natural moving company! These guys sit in prison all day getting buffed, lifting weights eight hours a day. So we went home and wrote ‘Moving’ in real kooky letters, and ‘We’ll do it for less,’ and we put a flyer under the windshield of every car and we just leafleted, leafleted, leafleted for months, actually. Until somebody finally called the phone number. And they described a job to us . . . and then, oh my god, we didn’t know what to do, we didn’t know what to charge . . .

“So we called a major moving company and described the job to them. They gave us a quote . . . and we did it for less. We rented a truck. We rented little uniforms. We lost money on the first job, of course, but that was all right. We told our people, ‘This is it. This is the whole reputation of Delancey Street resting on your shoulders. We’re gonna teach these people who we are. We can do anything they can do. We can do it better, politer, so speak in your best language. Smile no matter what. And let’s get this job done.’

“Well, we did a great job, and the customers recommended us. We started doing similar jobs. And then one day the Public Utilities Commission found me. It turned out moving companies are a regulated, licensed industry. Who knew? I said, ‘Oh, sorry! We didn’t know.’ We paid our fines. We got all the paperwork that we needed. And then we did it correctly.”

Today Delancey Street Movers has a fleet of trucks and the company has expanded into catering, furniture design and transport services for senior citizens and people who are handicapped.

## THE SECOND BUSINESS VENTURE

The renovation of “Russia,” as the residents called it, became a hallmark of the Delancey Street approach. Ex-cons who initially knew nothing about fixing up houses took on the task themselves, trimming wood, nailing molding, repairing plaster . . . and the work led to the creation of still another business.

“We started a construction company,” says Silbert . . . and the first outside job came in the usual unexpected manner.

“We were trying to find a private school for one of our residents,” she recalls, “a young girl who’d been a prostitute . . . and her mother was a prostitute . . . her sisters were prostitutes. We didn’t want her to go back to public schools, so we went to all the private schools in the area and said, ‘We’ll trade you. We’re able-bodied people. We know how to build things. Whatever you want . . .’

“One school agreed to take her. First they asked us to paint the school inside and out, so we went to a paint store and asked the man what to buy and how to paint. He told us. Then they asked us to build a kinder-gym with a slide and swings, so I bought a copy of *Sunset* magazine, it had a ‘Build Your Own Back Yard’ section. As the ‘intellectual’ of the group, I read it out loud. I’m terrible with my hands, so other people figured out what I was talking about. We built that thing. As it turned out . . . I mean we sanded it, it was just gorgeous. But when we got it put together, you know, when you climbed up the steps . . . the slide shot upwards like a cannon! We had to dismantle the whole thing. It took us about six tries, but we did it.

“Then we re-did the building we were living in and bought a second building. We re-did the second building . . . and sold it for ten times more than we paid for it. That’s how we got the money to buy our third building . . . and years later, we built this whole complex.”

When the Delancey Street residents began working on the Embarcadero, only five of them knew anything about construction, and their expertise came either from prison or the streets . . . the labor foreman had learned by helping to pour concrete for the handball court at San Quentin. But the residents rolled up their sleeves and took on the job of designing and building the entire complex. People with experience mostly as thieves, murderers and unskilled dope fiends became plumbers, electricians and pile drivers.

“We taught the building trades to 350 people while we were building this place,” says Silbert, some of it with the help of volunteers from the community. “And we put up some of these walls six or seven times. We’d put them up . . . we’d put them up wrong . . . we’d say, ‘Does the whole thing look as if it’s tilted to you?’ . . . ‘Yep’ . . . ‘OK. Down it comes.’”

## THE ETHNIC AMERICAN BISTRO

The moving company and the construction company were just the first of the more than 20 businesses Delancey Street has operated, including a funky restaurant that's become a favorite spot for San Franciscans. Even here, though, the Delancey Street approach was different.

"A couple of professional restaurateurs came out to advise us," remembers Silbert. "They said, 'You have to do a market analysis of who is going to come to your restaurant and what kind of food they want to eat.' Well, I'm not going to do that! Number one, we don't have the people to do it and, number two, we can only cook the food we know how to cook. We are a multi-ethnic, old-fashioned American organization. That's how we live, how we speak and how we cook. We call ourselves an Ethnic American Bistro, which means we've used recipes from all of our backgrounds. Not the new versions -- more like Grandma's.

"I'll give you an example: I went to the mother of one of our residents who had given me a sweet potato pie as a Christmas present for taking care of her Sonny, as she called him, and I asked her to teach our people how to make her sweet potato pie. Now it's on the menu and it's called 'Sonny's Mother's Sweet Potato Pie.' What could be more simple than that? We also have a policy that if somebody wants something and it's not on the menu and we have the ingredients, we'll try to cook it.

"And we're nice to people, which isn't always easy. Nice can be hard. But it's part of what we do. In fact, the *Michelin Guide* called us the friendliest restaurant in San Francisco. It takes great courage to do what our people do. They have to walk around smiling at customers they are terrified to even talk to, maybe are even paranoid about. They have to say, 'Here is your hamburger, sir.' When the customer says, 'I ordered it medium rare,' they have to say, 'Oh, I'm terribly sorry, sir' instead of saying, 'No, you stupid asshole, you didn't order it medium rare!' Which is what they want to say because they're angry at everyone all the time. Friendly is not an easy quality."

## THE "ADORABLE" CREDIT UNION MAN

Each of the 20 businesses functions as a training school for the residents, and Silbert discovered early on that newly arrived residents almost always fell into a stereotypical trap when choosing what skills to learn.

"If we asked them, 'What do you want to get trained in?,'" she recalls, "they all picked the social stereotype that exists for them. All the women picked secretarial skills. All the minority guys picked physical labor. All the little Italian and Jewish boys picked sales. I mean it was really . . . it was like a joke. And so I realized, oh my god, in every way these people buy into what everybody sells them about who they are . . ."

Most of the training schools don't earn any money, but Silbert says "we don't differentiate. The whole point is for the residents to learn three marketable skills. Some of them bring in money, some of them don't . . . they just help us run the organization."

For example, says Silbert, "we keep all our own books, so there's a finance and accounting training school. Residents start out by learning to file alphabetically. Then they learn to add . . . then to keep accounts receivable for one of our departments . . . then for a couple of departments . . . then for everything! Then they learn accounts payable . . . then the general ledger . . . and *then* they can go on and become a CPA, as many of our graduates have done."

Delancey Street also became the first federal credit union run by and for ex-felons, a crucial step in the organization's development because the inability to get credit often influences the decision to return to a life of crime.

"It was adorable," remembers Silbert, "when the man came and did 'every American is entitled to credit' . . . that was great. Although he did become a little hysterical when he was trying to get a sense of who our people were. He said, 'Well, you know, we're going to teach you check writing. How many of you have ever written checks?' Everybody's hand went up. 'How many of you have ever written major checks for a large amount of money?' About half the hands went up. And he said, 'Oh, well, then, they're pretty experienced.' And I said, 'No, you forgot the other question. How many of you have ever written legitimate checks of your

own?' Three little hands went in the air. I thought he was going to *die*. But it was too late. They had already chartered us."

## THE ANTI-PLANNER

The business opportunities have been many. In addition to the moving company, the construction company and the restaurant, the list includes an advertising incentives company, a Christmas tree lot that generates more than \$1 million in revenue per year, and more than a dozen others . . . but Silbert says "I have never once done a business plan. I have never read a business book. If you asked me a question about being a social entrepreneur, I'd have no idea what it means."

In many respects, she has applied the concept of "acting as if" to her entrepreneurial adventures. "I don't know anything about business," she says. "To this day, I've never read so much as an article . . . and the residents were furious with me one day when *Forbes* called and I forgot to call them back! When I finally get a chance to read, I want to read novels or poetry. I want to be elevated. So I really don't know the field.

"What I do know," she says, "is that we've proved you can be very decent, very communally minded, not the slightest individualistic . . . and you can still succeed on the bottom line . . . whatever the hell that bottom line is. I'm not big on planning. I don't make a budget, I don't make projections.

"Take the restaurant . . . I don't say it has to earn a certain amount of money. We've been around for eight years now and we've done unbelievably well since the day we opened. Tuesdays are slow; the weekends are usually overcrowded. Some days there's a line around the block -- and we have no idea why or when that's going to happen! For the most part, we serve about 280 lunches -- and about 400 meals -- a day. What I spend my time doing is tasting things to make sure they're fresh, and dealing with people issues . . ."

## "YOU GET THEM BY EARNING THEM . . ."

Six months into their residency, most residents have usually gained enough confidence to be able to look honestly at their past for the first time. "We do this in a weekend marathon session called a Dissipation," says Silbert, "which is set up to help them shed the guilt of past behaviors. This is very important because our residents are caught in a downward spiral of self-destructive acts that lead to guilt, which leads, in turn, to self-hatred."

Residents spend the weekend in groups of 15 or so, reliving every horrible deed they've ever committed so they can rid themselves of the guilt. The marathon concludes with the older residents guiding the newer ones toward an understanding that they have, indeed, become someone new and are capable of behaving differently.

But dissipation is just part of the program. In addition, residents are encouraged to help others in the community. They work with senior citizens, juveniles from poor areas, people who are disabled, and they give back to the community in myriad ways, including picking up trash on surrounding streets and running a food-distribution service for 60 charitable organizations in the San Francisco area. And while they're learning to understand themselves, residents are also actively teaching newer ones, thus pulling others up the ladder with them.

"Everybody essentially finds places to rise," says Silbert. "You don't get pride or self-respect or self-esteem or any of those words by saying to each other in groups, 'I think you're a good person.' You get them by *earning* them in life. You can't just sit around and say, 'I have pride.' So we decided we would train people in everything they needed to know to be successful."

For that reason, it doesn't matter to the people at Delancey Street whether a resident works in a profitable business or a training school that loses money. "It's not that because you're a good mechanic that you're hot shit or because you earn more money that makes you better," says Silbert. "Everything . . . we

consider everything equal . . . actually, in all honesty, we tilt toward the people stuff. . . . the people doing the people stuff are held in the highest esteem. So the guys running the moving company -- which nets two million dollars a year -- I mean, we're proud that everybody in the moving company is doing well, but we're most proud when the thing they talk about the most is the guys working together, the guys making a team, the guys showing our best face to the customers . . . ."

## THE VATICAN ROOM

As they wend their way through the days at Delancey Street, residents are constantly moving from one figurative "room" to another. "We use a lot of humor," says Silbert, "and we try very hard not to take ourselves at all seriously." So the three rooms are called The Vatican Room (where residents work on their people skills), The State Room (where they handle administrative chores) and The War Room (where they manage the businesses and training schools).

A clear hierarchy exists within each of the rooms, but a resident might be a junior person in one of them and a senior person in another. For example, a resident might work in the restaurant, which places him under the authority of six other people in The War Room, but that same person might be a "barber" in The Vatican Room, "somebody who yells at others when they screw up. They're known as 'barbers,'" says Silbert, "because on the street, yelling at somebody's called giving someone a haircut."

The Vatican Room is the place where the residents mend their souls . . . but The State Room and The War Room are the places that keep the organization going. For example, says Silbert, "the people in The State Room are the ones who do the accounting . . . the people who make everybody fill out an eight-part form that nobody wants to fill out when they have to go buy something . . . the people in charge of housing . . . the people who fix the vehicles . . . the people who tell you whether you can have a car tonight. The rules and regs people."

According to Silbert, "most of our time and attention is spent on interpersonal issues. 'How is everybody? Who's mad? Who's hurt?' The whole point of The Vatican Room is to help the individual. How do we get somebody to change and become decent, to become a good human being?"

"All day long it's like having a tape recorder in which you're always pressing the 'pause' button and staying 'Stop! That wasn't the right way to do it.' We're constantly telling people, 'You don't talk to somebody that way. You don't do that. Please help him. What's going on with you? Well, then, learn to say it. Instead of pretending you're mad about the dinner and throwing food on the ground, why can't you say, 'I got a bad phone call today.' Let's focus where it really is.'"

"That's pretty much what goes on here all day every day. 'Don't talk to each other that way. If this were a real job, you'd be fired. Get that through your head. That is not the way you talk to your boss. Now let's go back and do it over again. And let's do it correctly.'"

## RIGHT AND WRONG

Of course there are some who wonder how Silbert knows what the "correct" way should be . . . but she's scornful of their concern.

"I believe everybody knows basic right from basic wrong," she says. "I don't need two doctorates to know that. Everybody knows that. Everybody knows what's decent and what's indecent behavior. Everybody knows when you set somebody up, you know, don't do that. It's not nice, even if you could have gotten away with it and looked good. If you find a dollar on the street and nobody saw you, turn it in. That's the right thing to do. Everybody knows that. You don't pocket it. That's the wrong thing to do."

"So we're pretty basic on right and wrong. Take our restaurant, for example . . . you try to be nice to your customers. You set your prices at a fair and reasonable rate so you're not undercutting the market but you're not charging so much for food that only certain people get to go to restaurants. You make a restaurant so that regular folk can come and be comfortable. And you treat them absolutely all equally, as if

they're all the most important people on earth. You know that's right . . . if you stopped anybody on the street, they'd tell you that's common sense . . . ”

## NO GOVERNMENT FUNDING

All this sounds too good to be true, of course -- especially when you consider the business side of the equation. Unlike nearly every other rehabilitation program in the nation, Delancey Street refuses to take any money from the state or federal government.

“We've never taken any government money for several reasons,” says Silbert. “First of all, the government would never have given us money to begin with. They didn't approve of our methods. The idea of having no staff, of relying on the people who are the problem to be the solution, which is our basic premise, just doesn't make sense to the government.”

In addition, government agencies have difficulty pinpointing Delancey Street's mission.

“We've refused to be a one-issue organization,” says Silbert. “For years, everybody wanted to know what we were. ‘Are you a drug program?’ No. ‘But your people are all drug addicts.’ Yes, but that's not what we're about. ‘Well, most of your people are criminals, so are you a rehab organization?’ No. ‘Everybody has to get a high school equivalency degree -- does that make you a literacy center?’ No. ‘Are you a vocational training center?’ No.”

“You see, we teach people *everything* they need to know. We teach them how to set a table -- but we're not a table-setting organization! We teach them what clothes to wear and how to wear them and what wool and polyester and cotton are . . . we teach them everything. But that doesn't make us a clothing organization. And on and on and on.”

But there's a more important reason why Silbert refuses government funding. “People have to earn their own self-respect,” she says. “Sitting around waiting for a welfare check is just as bad as the members of a wealthy family waiting for their daddy to die so they can become 'heir' heads. If the government gave us our money, it would be just like a welfare check, we wouldn't need to rely on our residents . . . and *they* wouldn't have to develop their strengths. This way, if our residents don't become talented very quickly, then we don't eat.”

Avoiding government funding also insulates Delancey Street from one of the most common criticisms received by nonprofits. “It costs us far less to house and feed a person at Delancey Street than it does to keep someone in jail,” says Silbert, “and we don't use taxpayer money to do it!”

Although it eschews government funding, Delancey Street does rely on donations . . . not so much of money, but of products. “Almost all our clothes are donated,” says Silbert. “The glass for the restaurant windows was donated, and the copper that makes the bar. But we etched the glass ourselves, and pounded the copper. We put in the acoustical tile, but the tile was donated.”

“We've never gone out after money. We don't even have a fundraising department. We don't have a brochure. We don't have a mailing. We've never once contacted the media or a PR firm, our restaurant doesn't advertise . . .

“Occasionally people give us money, and we accept it. And we do go out after product.” For example, she and the other residents wear donated clothing that comes from places such as The Gap and Brooks Brothers, who are among the many corporate entities that believe in her work. And there have been other ways to help, as well: Bank of America provided a \$10 million unsecured construction loan to help build the complex on the San Francisco waterfront.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

After completing that new residential-retail complex on the Embarcadero in 1989, Delancey Street became world-famous. ABC's "20/20" program did a half-hour special, *People* magazine came calling. With a 17-acre ranch in rural New Mexico, a large castle on 90 acres in Brewster, New York, and additional facilities in Los Angeles and North Carolina, Delancey Street is a proven entity. So what comes next?

"I don't want to grow too much ourselves," says Silbert, "because if we get too big, we aren't who we are . . . but we're training people to create their own Delancey Street . . . and we're taking over the entire juvenile justice system in San Francisco. We hope we can turn it into a model for the country . . . our residents feel that it's on our backs to fix things so these kids don't end up forty and hopeless on the streets."

There are those who say Delancey Street is an experiment that cannot be repeated without her, but Silbert disagrees. "This process is bigger than any of us," she says. "Delancey Street has been built by every resident who's ever come through here . . . each of them putting on another brick."

But she does admit replication will be difficult because it "requires vastly different thinking about how to solve social problems. You've got to be burning with fire in your belly." Aside from that, she says, "you really don't need much money or much expertise . . . just a *lot* of dedication! And there are so many bored people out there desperately searching for something to do . . . I think they'd be in heaven doing something like this . . ."

## "WE HAVEN'T EVEN BEGUN . . ."

But Silbert has the nagging feeling she's failed in one important way: Making people understand what Delancey Street is all about. Despite the myriad news reports, awards and honors that have been heaped on her, she speaks despairingly about those who come to visit.

"I've met with Presidents and with their top staff," she says. "They go away and I think it's about to happen. And then they come back and say, 'We want to replicate you as a . . . whatever . . . and then we have to be one thing -- like a welfare reform program. And I say, 'No. You missed the point. You've got to start making schools. Different kinds of colleges. Make another Harvard where you've got to be in the bottom five per cent of the population to get in . . . but your goals are the same.'"

"But no one has gotten that yet . . . I keep thinking that finally someone will see us on television or someplace and come to understand that we as a society must change the way we deal with the underclass . . . but they don't . . . and we haven't even begun . . ."

## EPILOGUE

*The cab driver is shaking his head.*

*"Delancey Street," he says. "Yeah, I heard of that place, I know where it is . . . it's got all those junkies running it. They're in charge, right? Just what you need, junkies running their own treatment center . . ."*

*It's a common perspective -- the idea that people who were once criminals are rotten to the core. Images of strung-out addicts and seedy prostitutes loom large . . . and there's no possibility of true rehabilitation, because the crook, the junkie and the whore are inherently flawed, from the inside out, and cannot be redeemed.*

*As for the idea of making money honestly . . .*

*"Naw, I never been inside," says the cab driver, "but I read about it in the papers. They get a lot of press. I guess they do a good job, but, I don't know . . ."*

*He shakes his head again. "They've got this new headquarters, huge, very fancy. It's part of a big complex they own . . . the whole thing, I'm pretty sure. And they're making money hand over fist . . .*

*"A bunch of junkies!"*