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Vistas of Endless Possibility

Delancey Street Foundation helps felons and addicts
rehabilitate themselves into responsible citizens

By Vince Stehle

After Shirley Lamar dropped out of the eighth grade because she was pregnant, her life became a haze of drugs and crime. She became addicted to heroin, fell into prostitution, and was arrested more times than she can remember for offenses ranging from burglary to assault to drug possession.

Soon after she turned 40, when she was jailed for the last time, a prison counselor suggested that she try to straighten out her life at the Delancey Street Foundation here. Once at Delancey Street, a pathbreaking organization that provides job training, peer counseling, food, and shelter, Ms. LaMarr kicked her drug habit, earned a high-school-equivalent diploma, and learned, for the first time in her life, how to be a role model for her children.

Now she is the manager of the Ridge Hotel in Oakland. "I thank God every single night of my life that I made it to Delancey Street," she says.

Though remarkable, Ms. LaMarr's story is not unique. More than 11,000 criminals and drug addicts have been rehabilitated at Delancey Street since it was started a quarter century ago.

Delancey Street has since expanded its operations into other cities, running similar facilities in New York City, Los Angeles, and Greensboro, NC, and on a ranch in rural New Mexico. And now the organization is trying to persuade governments and foundations to put money into spreading its approach to other cities and towns.

Charity's Driving Force

The charity was founded by the late John Maher, a recovering alcoholic, and Mimi Silbert, then a young criminologist with a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. Mr. Maher fell back into his addiction a decade ago and died from a heart attack in 1988. The irrepressible Ms. Silbert, now 52, remains the driving force behind Delancey Street.

"Mimi is kind of like the mother of the family," says Ms. LaMarr. "It's a family that pushes you to be a healthy person. They kick your butt when you are wrong, and they love you when you go the right way."

The metaphor of family is a keystone in the Delancey Street philosophy. The name comes from the street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan where new immigrants came to America to build new lives after the turn of the century. Extended families establish small businesses there, pooling their talents to propel them into the mainstream of American society.

Similarly, the Delancey Street Foundation says Ms. Silbert, is a haven for people who have been shut out of the American dream. The charity is organized around the "each one teach one" principle. Former drug addicts and felons who have been involved with the charity for a long time counsel newcomers on how to overcome their addictions and their criminal behavior.

Delancey Street residents are divided up into groups, with senior members acting as guardians to new arrivals. As a result, the charity does not find it necessary to hire professional social workers.

Nobody at Delancey street -- Ms. Silbert included draws a salary. The residents live simply, but comfortably, in a communal environment where all of their food, clothing, and entertainment is provided by the charity. About 500 people live in the San Francisco headquarters, and an additional 400 live in the organization's other facilities.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Even as the federal prison system is boiling over with racial hatred, ethnically diverse Delancey Street is a virtual oasis of racial calm. Split evenly among whites, blacks, and Hispanics, the organization's residents have managed to overcome the prejudices they held before entering Delancey Street, says Ms. Silbert.

"We have coming in our door, without question, the most prejudiced population that could live in the country today, coming from gangs where they are sworn to kill each other," says Ms. Silbert. "Not only have they not killed each other, but they have become each other's best friends because they understand the very simple concept: United we stand, divided we fall."

Many people familiar with Delancey Street say that the organization's striking success is due to Ms. Silbert's charismatic leadership. But she brushes aside such praise. The program works, she argues because recovering addicts and rehabilitated ex-offenders are best able to teach

other troubled souls how to repair their lives. Without that system, the program would not succeed, says Ms. Silbert, "even if I were the most charming, the most charismatic, the most brilliant human being in the world."

Operates Many Businesses

Delancey Street is uncommon among social-service groups because it earns much of its operating revenues from a wide range of retail businesses open to the public. Last year Delancey received slightly more than half of its \$12.3 million revenues in income from the businesses it runs. The rest came from donations of products and cash.

The organization's flagship facility here is known and loved for its bustling businesses. It runs a stylish, moderately priced restaurant that has a striking view of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge and an eclectic menu that ranges from Caribbean to Thai to Moroccan. Delancey Street Movers carries the group's name, emblazoned on moving vans, throughout the streets of San Francisco. In season, Delancey Street sells Christmas trees to the public, and businesses hire it to set up and decorate seasonal displays.

The group also rents in-line-skating equipment, runs a printing business, and sells flowers grown in its gardens. Delancey Street's residents repair cars in its automotive service center, and the charity has a transportation business that helps elderly, disabled, and other people who might have trouble using the city's public-transit system.

While Delancey Street is frequently praised for its entrepreneurial vigor, Ms. Silbert says that the businesses serve a greater purpose than simply financing its operations. "We are not money driven" she says. "Our bigger point in life is to prove that our residents are capable of learning everything they need to live successfully."

Delancey Street depends not only on its businesses but also on millions of dollars in donated goods and services. Most of the contributions are product donations, which help fuel the businesses and provide residents' basic needs, such as food and clothing. Delancey Street receives some unsolicited contributions of cash, but almost never asks for money.

Likewise, the organization has steered away from government funds. The emphasis on self reliance was designed to demonstrate that, no matter how deeply troubled they are when they arrive, the people at Delancey Street are capable of fending for themselves if they work together.

"We wanted to prove that the throwaways of society can, on their own, totally build an organization," says Ms. Silbert.

She says that now that the organization has proved its effectiveness, she wants to see it recreated on a wider scale. To do that,

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argues, foundations and government should invest in such efforts.

Foundation officials familiar with Delancey Street attest to the success, and agree that similar programs should be financed by grant makers. "It's probably the most powerful rehabilitative program in the criminal justice field says Kenneth Schoen, who oversees criminal justice grants at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York.

Although Ms. Silbert has no specific fund raising goal for how much it would take to spread the program to other places, she argues that society needs to place substantial resources into rehabilitation, or suffer the consequences. "We have done little to bring up the underclass" says Ms. Silbert, "and we have done even less to bring the criminal hard core addicts into the successful legitimate mainstream in America.

Penalties for Criminals

Ms. Silbert's drive to expand Delancey Street will probably not be popular with many politicians who in recent years have been stiffening sentence requirements and other penalties for criminals.

Here in California, Ms. Silbert says, she is especially incensed at the adoption last year of a "three strikes and you're out" law that requires people convicted of three serious crimes to be imprisoned for at least 20 years.

Delancey Street has helped people who have committed far more than three strikes. On average Ms. Silbert says, the people who come to Delancey Street had been convicted 18 times before turning to the charity. Under the new California law, she fears, most will end up staying in jail for much of their lives without much hope of ever getting help.

Delancey Street residents say their time in prison did nothing to change their behavior. They say it was only when they came to the charity that they were able to become responsible citizens.

"In prison, you are responsible for absolutely nothing" says Gerald Miller, who has been with Delancey Street for four years after spending nearly two decades bouncing in and out of correctional facilities for burglary and other offenses.

"When you come into Delancey Street, you have to walk a certain way and speak a certain way, and you have to be responsible and accountable to other people," he says.

A key element in Delancey Street's effectiveness, he says in its forcing residents to communicate more openly and directly. They are required to express themselves in a variety of settings.

After lunch everyone stays in the cafeteria to discuss a topic in an informal seminar. On one recent afternoon, the group was hashing out the proper way to inform senior residents when someone had acted improperly. From every corner of the room residents shared observations, sometimes in disagreement and sometimes in support of each other's opinions. Occasionally, a discussion leader:

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would seek out the views of these who seemed unwilling to volunteer their comments, but no one refused to speak up.

Such a free wheeling discussion is all the more remarkable, given the background of the residents, says Mr. Miller. "Most of us at Delancey Street have led pretty isolated and lonely lives," he says, "so we didn't have a lot of people who cared what we had to say."

Architectural Triumph

At Delancey Street, residents live in an environment quite unlike the harsh, anonymous reality of prison life. The San Francisco facility, built almost entirely by Delancey Street residents with the guidance of local builders and craftsmen is a triumph of urban design. Although visitors and residents must pass through an imposing security gate, the general impression is one of an open campus.

The complex, which was constructed in large part with donated materials, has received widespread recognition, including awards from the American Institute of Architects and the Urban Land Institute. With its red tile roof, immaculate gardens, and sweeping views of San Francisco Bay, the Mediterranean style complex is not a frill, says Ms. Silbert. Rather, she

says Delancey Street's commitment to esthetics is an essential part of its rehabilitation program.

One reason Delancey Street succeeds, Ms. Silbert says, is that it creates opportunities for drug addicts and criminals to imbibe art and culture.

"They've gone to museums, and they know more about art than the average American," she says. "When you look at beautiful art and listen to beautiful music, and live in a beautiful building, and see vistas of endless possibility with bays and bridges, then you are transported upward."