

A Day at Choices – An Interview with Shirley Lamarr
By John Blackburn

Dr. Susan Kole, Director of Correctional Health Services for San Mateo County, wrote in her September 27, 2010, Program Evaluation, an excellent summary of what Choices is: "Choices provides education about chemical dependency and relapse prevention. Inmates are expected to engage in pro-social behaviors, their criminal thought patterns are challenged daily in individual and group sessions. Groups teach communication and problem solving skills which fosters and environment of respect for each other.

The counselors and custody staff, which reduces conflict and provides an opportunity to practice more adaptive ways of interacting with others. Inmates attend anger management and parenting skills groups, and are given the opportunity to earn a GED, learn to read and write, or apply to outpatient and residential programs as they plan for release. Recedivisim is not a valid measure of an in custody program like Choices since it has no influence over an inmate once they are released and return to the same neighborhood, situation, family and friends, lacking housing and employment skills. Recidivism is a result of the lack of aftercare resources in the community including residential and outpatient treatment, clean and sober housing, job training and employment opportunities. The function of Choices is to install hope, offer and Opportunity to learn new skills and ensure individuals are "treatment ready" for participation in community based programs. Only with adequate resources in the community can sobriety be maintained and recidivism reduced. In addition to providing chemical dependency services, Choices is an inmate management tool. Though there is a mix of inmates in the program; those charged with misdemeanors, felonies or both, those with gang affiliations and without, no incidences of violence occur. Because of this, historically a Choices pod housing 96 inmates has only one deputy assigned to it while similar pods typically have two or more."

Founded by Dr. Teri Delane and Shirley Lamarr in 1994 at the Maple Street Women's Jail with nine women in the smallest pod, Choices grew to also include a men's program at Maguire. It has become the very best program the county can provide for correctional systems inmates to better themselves, find new meaning and direction in their lives and move beyond incarceration and re-integrate themselves back into society as functioning, productive individuals – if each person is willing to make the change – make the right choices – and most importantly, the continuing commitment to Choices and change.

Many articles have been written about Choices. Shirley has been profiled in many publications including the Daily Journal, East Palo Alto Today and the Redwood City Woodside Patch. She has been written about in Parade Magazine and in Street Life. She has been on numerous radio and television programs and was focused in the American Psychological Association article Mending Broken Lives, about honoring

Delancey Street co-founder Mimi Silbert for her tireless work in helping people turn their lives of crime and sadness to lives of productivity and health. Shirley best tells her own life story.

Before Delancey Street, I spent 20 years with violence, drugs, and prostitution. I was homeless on the streets and in and out of jail. While I knew my father, he was absent from our lives. My mother, rest her soul, was a mental and physical wreck and an alcoholic who lived on welfare all of her life. She taught me the life on the streets early. I was repeatedly beaten and sexually abused, not only as a child by people my mother brought into the home, but later by pimps and people on the streets where I lived. Horrifically, I taught my children to follow in my footsteps as fourth generation drug addicts, prostitutes and criminals. I came to Delancey Street as an alternative to a fifteen-year prison sentence. I had enormous guilt and vengeful anger. I had no skills, no education, and no hope. I stayed at Delancey Street five years where I lost a grandson to the streets, murdered in gang activity, but slowly gained back my children and grandchildren. I obtained a high school equivalency and a diploma from vocational college, computer and secretarial skills, sales skills, and an incredible ability to love and help others. After I graduated from DSF, my husband (also a Delancey Street graduate) and I worked to turn around the lives of our children and grandchildren and recently proudly watched a granddaughter spurn prostitution, the streets, drugs, and crime and become the first in the family to graduate high school and go to college. I ran a Safe and Sober Living Home for formerly homeless people with mental health and drug problems. I developed and currently run a county jail program for substance abusers, that is modeled after Delancey Street. I have a thriving career, a full and happy family with children and grandchildren and still volunteer with troubled folks. Mostly, I have and instill in others a sense of belief and goodness and hope.

SHIRLEY AND CHOICES

Shirley was at the end of her rope in life and in March, 1989, she enrolled in and spent five years at Delancey Street. "I wanted to break that cycle." Two months before she started, Delancey Street co-founder John Maher died. She graduated from the program on April Fools' Day in 1994.

She owes her life and the choices she has made to her time spent at Delancey Street. She also owes a debt of gratitude to Delancey Street co-founder and current direction Mimi Silbert, who not only encouraged her but pushed her out in front of the program as the poster child for Delancey Street. Mimi gave her the strength and confidence needed for her work in Choices and the community at large. "I was blessed and groomed by Mimi." Spending two and half years working with Mimi in her office gave Shirley the experience she needed to go out and change the world, one step at a time.

When she graduated, she and her husband, Bernard – he worked driving a truck at the Delancey Street moving company – ran the Ridge Hotel on 14th Street in

downtown Oakland. The clean and sober living facility was based on what Shirley had learned at Delancey Street. "Sober living was the focus, and recovery was the goal." Her plan was to ultimately get her Class A truck driving license and join her husband in opening a trucking business. But fate had a different plan for Shirley.

While Shirley was at the Ridge Hotel, Dr. Teri Delane started her internship in psychology at the Maquire Correctional Facility. Teri entered Delancey Street at the age of 17 as a prostitute, drug addict and drop out. While at Delancey Street, she earned her bachelor's degree, two master's degrees and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology.

In 1994, Teri wanted to develop a women's program in the jail. "It's because of Teri that I am here today." The Case Program, based on the AA 12-step model and for men only, had begun in 1997 at Maguire. There was no active men's program like Choices and one was needed. Teri had the professional background and along with Shirley and Viola Smith, another Delancey Street graduate, they talked with a true visionary, then. Sherriff Don Horsley. "He could see it." Sherriff Horsley along with others, including Rose Jacobs Gibson, was extremely supportive of the idea. The Case Program was shut down. Sherriff Horsley approached Teri and asked her what she needed to make it happen and Choices for men was born.

The blowback came quickly about ex-addicts and women, both strong willed and very loud and forthright, coming into and working at the men's jail and causing everything to fall apart. "Everyone was scared of the chaos they thought we would bring." In 21 years, we have proven them all very very wrong!" During that time, there has never been a fight in Choices and no drugs or weapons have ever been found. University studies have recently shown that the best treatment model is a therapeutic community within an institutional setting like Choices.

Teri trained Shirley while working together at Choices. In 2007, Teri left to follow her dream of running the Life Learning Academy, a charter high school on Treasure Island she opened in 1998. She wanted to continue her commitment to adolescents on the Delancey Street core principles and values. Shirley took over as Director of Choices.

In 2007, there was a seven and half page waiting list of inmates wanting to get into Choices and Sherriff Horsley wanted Choices to expand from one pod to two and the second pod filled in less than two weeks. Six East and West operated until last year, when Six West was taken for P.C.s and gang drop-outs.

In 2009, Shirley went on to open Mz. Shirliz Transitional House, a transitional sober living center to keep continuing education going beyond Choices. Now called The Centre, it is located in Redwood City and is a one-stop place where former inmates and recovering addicts can continue to turn their lives around with a stable living environment and house rules including equal participation, job searches and schooling. Everyone at The Centre has a purpose. The Centre offers catering,

landscaping and other services to bring in money for the program and keep the residents busy and useful to the community.

CHOICES – HOW TO GET IN AND HOW IT WORKS

Choices is not a referral-based program. The individual inmate must ask for an application form from any deputy who is required to give the inmate the form. The only inmates who are not considered for Choices are child molesters, arsonists, predators, and those currently taking any legal narcotic substances. (like methadone).

The application is forwarded to Choices and each is reviewed and approved or disapproved. Disapproval can also involve bad behavior in jail and gang banging. The applications keep pouring into Choices, anywhere from 10-20 per day. Some are re-applications by inmates who were rejected or have nothing to do and re-apply.

If the application is approved, a staff member interviews the inmate and the matter goes to Classification. "We work hand-in-hand." If classification approves, four to five inmates are sent at a time, space permitting. Each inmate must go through a one hour orientation and is assigned a mentor – another inmate, peer-to-peer – and a counselor.

Delancey Street did not take those with mental illness or those in NA or AA. "We do" The goal is to provide wrap-around services to inmates in the program.

In this program, "We do not lie, cheat or steal." It is all about learning to own your life and take personal responsibility for the choices you make and the action you take. The only pre-requisite for entering Choices is the desire to leave the program and continue on after release into other programs like continuing education, counseling or mental health support programs. It is the hope of program personnel that once an inmate either is released from the jail or transferred to another correctional facility, the inmate will continue working on changing their attitude, life and the choices they make.

A VISIT TO THE POD – A DAY IN CHOICES

It was an experience unmatched by any program I have ever visited to have the opportunity to spend a day at Choices with Shirley and her staff of dedicated professionals. "Every day is a challenge." The inmates all have individual behavioral issues and every one of them has to be monitored as to how they are getting along with each other. In the first two or three years of Choices, there were five men who were "three strikes" eligible and going to state prison. Even though they knew that is where they were going, "They set the heartbeat of this program." That beat continues today.

“People on the ‘outside’ think all we do is counseling” “What we do is not one-dimensional.” “Everything that is done is multi-dimensional.” “Each person gets individualized treatment.” “There are a lot of overlaps.”

Inmates live in a toilet with another man – that really puts the entire jail experience in perspective. And, they sleep on a morgue slab with a jail mattress made especially for jail use. The only privacy the inmate is allowed to have is to put a piece of cardboard over the window in their cell door when they use the toilet.

Everyone wears an identification wristband – red for someone who has been in prison and yellow for first offenders who have not been to prison yet. Clothing colors are red for gang, P.C. and mental health, and orange for general population. Inmates are in a living environment unlike that the other pods. There is furniture in the central area, couches draped with handmade quilts and covered with stuffed animals made by the women at the women’s jail, artwork adorning the walls made by inmates in the program encircling the center pod areas, and work tables and computers. The deputies that are assigned to the Choices pod love their assignment.

Classes are held in a classroom style setting, usually 12 or more students per class. Every day has a curriculum schedule – one for the women’s program and one for the men’s program. A typical weekday during the week at Choices for men involves (0600 – 0700) count and inspection, (0800-0815) a morning meeting, (0815-0845) a seminar on current events, concepts, speaking, history or training, (0930-1030) assigned projects in the day room and group meetings in classrooms run by Chris and Mike, including resume class, poetry and tutor training, GED and study time, domestic violence and parenting, gang prevention and spirituality, (1100-1200) Project Read and GED study, GED testing and mentee/mentor meetings, (noon to 1300) black out time, (1300-1430) social networking classes, ESL, critical thinking, and HIV counseling, (1300-1600) assigned projects in the day room, classes including breaking barriers, domestic violence, early recovery and WRAP, (1430-1600) Unlock your Thinking class, shower/plug-in and GED testing, (1600-1645) aerobic exercise, Spanish / English class and recreation, (1700-1900) black out and count and inspection, (1700-2100) Isam’s real talk seminar and change group (T,W,TH). On Sunday, there are religious services and everyone does AA from 1900-2000 hours.

Group meetings are held in a circle in one of the classrooms. “Life is a circle.” The energy manifests better when everyone is in a circle.” Here differences and grievances are talked out with openness and direct honesty. It is the process that works and the program continues to grow, “Because it is the right thing to do.” Choices is the only program that addresses the “whole” person. You don’t just deal with anger issues with anger management, you also address all of the other facets of the person’s life that are causing them problems – like stealing to support their habit of choice, or addiction, or lack of education and communication skills.

Each of the counselors, Chris, Mike and Mike, has about 30+ inmates. Harry, who came from the Case 12-step based program, is also on board. Choices is the only pod where all 96 inmates are out of their cells all of the time.

The program is based on the hierarchy model of Delancey Street. All information flows up and down through the hierarchy. Shirley is at the top – the mentors at the bottom. The community is critical to the program working, and everyone participating and getting along is essential. If there is conflict, there is a table with counselors who are there to resolve any issues that arise. The counselors are the ones to control any potential chaos. Each counselor brings their own style to how they work with their classes. There is also peer-to-peer counseling four times per week. Any inmate that has an issue can bring that issue to a group meeting on a slip of paper and the issue is discussed with time-outs used when appropriate. There is open and frank discussion about any and all concerns by both sides of the issue presented with the counselor as the mediator encouraging positive communication and understanding.

Choices is a program that works for those who want to make it work for them – if they make the right choices.