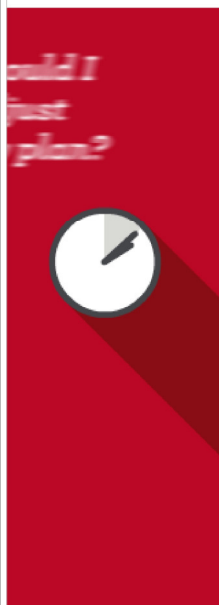




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Charles Dederich, 83, Synanon Founder, Dies

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER
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Charles E. Dederich, a reformed alcoholic who founded Synanon, the drug rehabilitation program that won widespread acclaim and amassed great wealth before it became associated with violence, died on Friday in Kaweah Delta Hospital in Visalia, Calif. Mr. Dederich, who lived in Visalia, was 83.

Mr. Dederich had several strokes beginning in the late 1980's. The cause of death was cardiorespiratory failure, said his wife, Ginny.

Founded in 1958 with a \$33 unemployment check in a seedy flat in Ocean Park, Calif., Synanon eventually attracted thousands of drug addicts and dropouts from the social turbulence of the 1960's to therapeutic communities for a course of tough, innovative treatment.

"Crime is stupid, delinquency is stupid and the use of narcotics is stupid," Mr. Dederich once said. "What Synanon is dealing with is addiction to stupidity."

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Synanon and its methods became the subject of books, articles, television documentaries and a 1965 film, "Synanon," which starred Edmond O'Brien as Mr. Dederich and Eartha Kitt as his third wife, Bettye.

By 1980, with millions of dollars in donations from American businesses, vast real estate holdings, overseas branches and its own lucrative enterprises Synanon, which was exempt from Federal and state taxes as a charitable trust, had compiled assets of \$30 million to \$50 million, according to the estimates of law-enforcement authorities.

But the organization, which claimed credit for thousands of rehabilitations, evolved from a renowned drug rehabilitation agency into what California officials described as a wealthy, authoritarian cult.

Accounts of violence and the insistence by Mr. Dederich on forced vasectomies for men in Synanon, mandatory abortions for women and the divorce of more than 230 of its married couples who were to switch to other partners led to investigations and unfavorable newspaper publicity.

In 1980, Mr. Dederich pleaded no contest to charges that he and two members of Synanon's security force had conspired to commit murder by placing a four-and-a-half-foot rattlesnake in the mailbox of a lawyer who had sued the organization.

The lawyer, Paul Morantz, who was acting on behalf of former Synanon members and relatives of members who maintained they were being held in the organization against their will, was bitten and hospitalized for six days.

Mr. Dederich, who said he was in poor health, was sentenced to five years' probation, fined \$5,000 and ordered not to participate actively in running Synanon.

By the middle of the 1980's, when the organization declared itself a religion, was condemned by the Government for a corporate policy of "terror and violence" and was stripped of its tax-exempt status, Synanon was declining in influence and prestige.

Charles Edwin Dederich, who was named for his father and known generally as Chuck, was born in Toledo, Ohio, on March 22, 1913.

When he was 4, his father, an alcoholic, was killed in an automobile accident. He was 8 when a brother died and 12 when his mother, the former Agnes Kountz, a classical concert singer, married a man he loathed.

Mr. Dederich was drinking heavily before he graduated from high school. He dropped out of the University of Notre Dame after 18 months because of poor grades and lost good jobs and two wives because of his drinking. When he was 43, he joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and after a while he turned his apartment in Ocean Park into a sanctuary first for alcoholics and soon for drug addicts as well.

"I say this with as much humility as I am capable, which isn't very much, but when I sit down and start to talk, people start gathering," he said in a 1980 deposition. "It is inevitable. No matter where I do that, it just happens. I can't stop it."

Underlying Synanon's approach was the conviction that addicts were not adults, and it was futile to try to cure them with adult procedures.

Mr. Dederich discarded Alcoholics Anonymous's emphasis on religion and built a methodology around a therapeutic community, a tough, disciplined, drug-free environment with a dash of tender loving care.

Attack therapy was an essential component of the treatment. Three times weekly, members met in small groups, for violently outspoken discussions, called games or synanons, in which they released pent-up hostilities.

On Sept. 15, 1958, Synanon -- a name coined when an addict stumbled over the words "seminar" and "symposium," gave up and called them "synanon" -- was incorporated as a nonprofit California foundation with 40 members.

Mr. Dederich's widow said it was in the early days of Synanon that he created the saying, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Mr. Dederich was married four times. Two of his wives left him because of his drinking. His third wife, Bettye, died in 1977. Besides his widow, the former Ginny Schorin, whom he married nearly 20 years ago, Mr. Dederich is survived by a son from his first marriage, Chuck, of Visalia; a daughter from his second marriage, Jady Dederich of San Francisco, and three grandchildren.

Photo: Charles E. Dederich. (United Press International, 1980)



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The Cult That Spawned the Tough-Love Teen Industry

Let our journalists help you make sense of the noise: Subscribe to the Mother Jones Daily newsletter and get a recap of news that matters.

The idea that punishment can be therapeutic is not unique to the Rotenberg Center. In fact, this notion is widespread among the hundreds of “emotional growth boarding schools,” wilderness camps, and “tough love” antidrug programs that make up the billion-dollar teen residential treatment industry.

This harsh approach to helping troubled teens has a long and disturbing history. No fewer than 50 programs (though not the Rotenberg Center) can trace their treatment philosophy, directly or indirectly, to an antidrug cult called Synanon. Founded in 1958, Synanon sold itself as a cure for hardcore heroin addicts who could help each other by “breaking” new initiates with isolation, humiliation, hard labor, and sleep deprivation.

Today, troubled-teen programs use Synanon-like tactics, advertising themselves to parents as solutions for everything from poor study habits to substance misuse. However, there is little evidence that harsh behavior-modification techniques can solve these problems. Studies found that Synanon’s “encounter groups” could produce lasting psychological harm and that only 10 to 15 percent of the addicts who participated in them recovered. And as the classic 1971 Stanford prison experiment demonstrated, creating situations in which the severe treatment of powerless people is rewarded inevitably yields abuse. This is especially true when punishment is viewed as a healing process. Synanon was discredited in the late 1970s and 1980s as its violent record was exposed. (The group is now remembered for an incident in which a member placed a live rattlesnake—rattle removed—in the mailbox of a lawyer who’d successfully sued it.) Yet by the time Synanon shut down in 1991, its model had already been widely copied.

In 1971, the federal government gave a grant to a Florida organization called The Seed, which applied Synanon’s methods to teenagers, even those only suspected of trying drugs. In 1974, Congress opened an investigation into such behavior-modification programs, finding that The Seed had used methods “similar to the highly refined brainwashing techniques employed by the North Koreans.”

The bad publicity led some supporters of The Seed to create a copycat organization under a different name. Straight Inc. was cofounded by Mel Sembler, a Bush family friend who would become the GOP’s 2000 finance chair and who heads Lewis “Scooter” Libby’s legal defense fund. By the mid-’80s, Straight was operating in seven states. First Lady Nancy Reagan declared it her favorite antidrug program. As with The Seed, abuse was omnipresent—including beatings and kidnapping of adult participants. Facing seven-figure legal judgments, it closed in 1993.

But loopholes in state laws and a lack of federal oversight allowed shuttered programs to simply change their names and reopen, often with the same staff, in the same state—even in the same building. Straight spin-offs like the Pathway Family Center are still in business.

Confrontation and humiliation are also used by religious programs such as Escuela Caribe in the Dominican Republic and myriad “emotional growth boarding schools” affiliated with the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (wwasp), such as Tranquility Bay in Jamaica. wwasp’s president told me that the organization “took a little bit of what Synanon [did].” Lobbying by well-connected supporters such as wwasp founder Robert Lichfield (who, like Sembler, is a fundraiser for Republican presidential aspirant Mitt Romney) has kept state regulators at bay and blocked federal regulation entirely.

By the ’90s, tough love had spawned military-style boot camps and wilderness programs that thrust kids into extreme survival scenarios. At least three dozen teens have died in these programs, often because staff see medical complaints as malingering. This May, a 15-year-old boy died from a staph infection at a Colorado wilderness program. His family claims his pleas for help were ignored. In his final letter to his mother, he wrote, “They found my weakness and I want to go home.”

* Has disavowed extreme and humiliating tactics

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An Oregon School for Troubled Teens Is Under Scrutiny

By Maia Szalavitz | Friday, Apr. 17, 2009

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Roots in Utopian Principles

The techniques that Mount Bachelor allegedly uses, while unconventional, are not new. They are similar to the tenets of the once popular "human potential movement" of the 1960s and '70s, which purported to change people's lives through intense emotional experiences. The movement grew out of the practices of Synanon and other California experiments in utopian living, which later helped spawn so-called large group awareness training programs, such as LifeSpring and est.



Simone Paddock for TIME

Mount Bachelor Academy, near Prineville, Ore.

Synanon began as a drug-rehabilitation program before morphing into a controversial cult and is credited with putting forth the idea that confrontation and boot-camp-style breakdown tactics could cure teen misbehavior and addiction. Synanon's confrontational techniques influenced est and LifeSpring, which began selling weekend seminars designed to prompt emotional breakthroughs in participants.

Food, sleep and access to the outside world — sometimes even to the bathroom — were strictly controlled. Using intense role-playing, humiliation and physical experience, the seminars attempted to liberate people from victimhood by teaching them that they are ultimately responsible for everything that happens to them, including being a victim of child abuse or rape.

Mount Bachelor's Lifesteps seminars appear to share these tactics and philosophy. Several of its top employees formerly worked at a now defunct chain of troubled-teen programs known as CEDU, which was founded by former Synanon members. "The process of breaking kids down is very much integrated into the therapeutic milieu," says Kat Whitehead, executive director of the Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth, an expert on such abuse, who has testified before Congress on the topic. "Unfortunately, that seems to be very common, at least in the private facilities."

Although many people report being helped by cathartic seminars, studies suggest that programs like LifeSpring do not produce lasting change. Indeed, in the 1980s and early 1990s, LifeSpring lost millions of dollars in lawsuits related to suicides and psychiatric hospitalizations of participants.

Most mental-health experts today strongly disagree with the use of brutal confrontation or humiliation as therapy — particularly for vulnerable youths who have troubled pasts. Research suggests that feelings of being out of control characterize the typical patient's response to traumatic life events; consequently, recovery requires the avoidance of coercion. Experts say that pressuring trauma victims to retell their stories against their will tends to increase stress symptoms rather than alleviate them. And brain research associates feelings of shame and humiliation to stress responses that exacerbate depression and anxiety and may contribute to physical illness. In addition, isolation from parents, except in situations where they are abusive, can increase trauma further.

"There is absolutely no role for shame and humiliation in the treatment of youth," says Christopher Bellonci, medical director of the Walker School, a nonprofit serving children with serious mental, behavioral and learning problems. "I know of no clinical rationale for treating youth for any condition in that fashion ... They are engendering new trauma, not repairing it."

Whatever the Supreme Court decides in *Forest Grove v. TA*, the case will put the spotlight on questions surrounding these troubled-teen programs. And while Oregon's investigations continue, yet more change may be forthcoming: a bill introduced by Congressman Miller to regulate private teen programs and ban "acts of physical or mental abuse designed to humiliate, degrade or undermine a child's self respect" passed the House of

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