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Chuck Dederich Still Rules **Synanon**, But Now He Has 1,300 Subjects And A \$22 Million Empire



Chuck Dederich is considering a ban on pregnancies at **Synanon**. "We haven't told anybody they can't," **Synanon's** 63-year-old founder says. "I've just planted the notion. I don't believe that celibacy itself would produce anything we want at this time, but I can see some good coming out of childlessness. Maybe only a selected few, an elite corps, should have babies. I don't know yet what is best for our burgeoning causes."

Dederich's concern over something as cosmic as overpopulation indicates how far **Synanon** has come from its humble beginnings. The storefront operation he started in Santa Monica in 1958 to rehabilitate drug addicts has grown into an empire with assets of \$22 million and 1,300 subjects. They are deployed in three California facilities—Santa Monica, Tomales and Badger—with 300 land vehicles, 10 planes and a 5,000-foot embryo airport. Every year companies donate products to the **Synanon** Foundation by the carload: beef, shoes, furniture, clothing and building materials. ("Our tax-exempt privilege gives us the right, really, to hustle goods and services," says Dederich. "And they can write it off.") **Synanon** is also the nation's second largest supplier of promotional specialties—those ballpoint pens, wallets and T-shirts given away as merchandising gimmicks.

The number of people who have undergone the **Synanon** experience recently passed 15,000. About a third of the 1,300 currently in residence are so-called "squares" who are there not because they have drug problems but because they like the communal, highly structured way of life. **Synanon's** purpose, however, Dederich says, is still "working with troubled people." As always, it accepts what Dederich calls "dope fiends" off the street, and now probation officers and judges send him delinquents from all over

the country. The squares, who are also called "lifestylers," pay to join **Synanon** (plus agreeing to have their heads shaved; most also have their earlobes pierced—women wear four earrings, men one). Some converts have arrived with amazing legacies. One woman donated \$1 million. A man turned over his mortgage company. The minimum dues are about \$450 a month for a single person, \$750 for a couple and \$400 additional for each child.

Adult members' time is divided into two periods: seven six-hour days of "motion," or work such as maintenance and construction, and seven days of "growth," when they are free to rest, read and pursue hobbies.

Children at **Synanon** attend school for three weeks, then work as apprentice carpenters or scullery maids for three weeks. "Everybody teaches," Dederich says, "secretaries, prostitutes, ex-drug addicts." Discipline is harsh. "When kids get out of line they are knocked on their asses. That treatment turns them into woolly lambs in about a week." The system seems to work. **Synanon** children have been given national achievement tests and score well above average.

For both children and adults, at all times, there is the Game, the say-whatever-you-want-to-say group session that Dederich invented in the early days of **Synanon**. "If I were a member of the Washington circuit, I would go to cocktail parties," Dederich says. "Here, gaming is what we do. Games are how we run our government. We have dinner games, breakfast games, social games. The game is an emotional bath. Everything goes but physical violence." (Every week or so Dederich and his third wife, Betty, join in one of the games. "The kids love it when Betty goes after me for being too fat," Dederich says, "or because I smash her up while we're having sex.")

Dederich and Betty, a former drug addict whom he married in 1960, live in splendor in **Synanon's** new 360-acre installation in Badger, 60 miles from Fresno. "I would have a hell of a time," Dederich admits, "matching what we've got on the outside." Badger is a hill-cradled enclave of modern buildings with a swimming pool and a riding stable. Fifty residents at a time stay there for rest and recreation. It is known as **Synanon's** "home place."

The rooms at Badger are handsome, with colorful sheets and down comforters on the double beds. Perfumes, body lotions, razors and aspirin are lined up on shelves. On each bedside table is a special radio on which the occupant can, among other things, listen in on any phone calls being made anywhere in the **Synanon** system. In the closets are robes for the short walk to a huge communal bathroom. Except for sleeping and making love, all **Synanon** activities are done together publicly.

Chuck Dederich wakes shortly before sunrise in his bedroom, a dark, luxurious cave. (His wife has an adjoining bedroom.) After a few exercises and a shower he strolls to the dining room. The first breakfasters are leaving for their daily tasks. He has a bowl of bran and coffee and lectures those who

remain on the virtues of bran. Dederich is a spellbinding talker on almost any subject whenever he has an audience.

Every afternoon at 3 he goes to his "outdoor office" beside the swimming pool and plays "Godfather." "I sit out there," he says, "and whittle and carve and glue things and people come over and visit." Whittling is a current Dederich passion and he has urged it, or some hobby, on all members. As is customary with Dederich suggestions, they have complied.

Dinner often lasts two hours or more, after which Dederich watches a movie or settles down with an undemanding novel. "I avoid like poison anything that can improve me," he says. "I'm satisfied with the way things are."

The Founder, as Dederich is known—or the Old Man, or Chairman of the Board—was born on March 22, 1913 in Toledo, Ohio to a mother who taught music and a father whom Dederich characterizes as a "drunken promoter." His father "managed to get himself" killed, Dederich says, in an automobile collision. "That could not have been easy in 1917," he muses. Insurance, supplemented by Mrs. Dederich's teaching, supported the family.

Chuck—with two younger brothers he was the man of the house at 4—did not suffer from insecurity. "I had that Big Daddy instinct very early," he says, "and I've been king of the mountain for a long, long time." When Chuck was 11 his mother married again. Dederich went to a Jesuit high school and then to Notre Dame. "I flunked every single course." Next stop: Toledo University. He quit that too. "I just never finished anything. All I remember is mind-numbing boredom."

Through much of the Depression he wandered from job to job, but spent nine years at Gulf Oil, in Toledo, where he married Chilnessa McKeon, a company secretary, and fathered Charles Jr. Called Dede, he now runs **Synanon's** facility at Tomales.

Dederich also drank. "I became a kind of typical alcoholic," he says. "I discovered at an early age that a couple of drinks would always fix me up." An almost fatal attack of meningitis at the beginning of World War II partially paralyzed the right side of his face. Today his eyelid still droops and he is deaf in his right ear. Once he recovered from the illness, he walked out on his wife and son and headed for California. He worked at odd jobs in and around Los Angeles, divorced Chilnessa and married Ruth Jason, also a secretary. They had a daughter, Cecilia Jason, nicknamed Jady. He began drinking so much his new wife called Alcoholics Anonymous. For a while he quit, then backslid. "Every drunk in AA is looking for an excuse to drink," he says now. "You've just got to learn to get your kicks from something else. There are things that are really better."

He landed a job as a model maker for an astrophysics development company and in 1956, when he was 43, went on the wagon permanently. He began appearing at AA meetings, first local, then statewide. "I

was a salesman," says Dederich, "and a fair-to-middling standup comic. I had a speaking engagement every night somewhere in California. I would talk about my adventures with Demon Rum."

But his marriage foundered, and Ruth threw him out. He rented a room with \$33-a-week unemployment insurance and settled down "to do a year of reading." (One day the telephone company sent a worker to remove his phone for nonpayment of bills: the man was his son, Dede.)

Chuck's pad attracted kindred spirits. He would stock up on soup and cigarettes, and in the evening ex-drunks would come by. Soon he was running a social center. "Then I got the idea that we should go into the business of sobering up drunks. It was the seed of **Synanon**. We rented the storefront next door."

By 1960 **Synanon** was getting results with drug addicts as well as alcoholics. But trouble continued to stalk him. His second wife, Ruth, who had remarried, was shot to death by her jealous husband. Dederich fought Ruth's mother for custody of his daughter, Jady, and won. It is indicative of the durability of his personal attachments that Jady, now 26, is a vice-president at **Synanon** and heir apparent to the empire. Her grandmother, whom Dederich battled in the courts, became a **Synanon** resident and eventually died there.

To his admirers, it is Dederich's magnetism that makes **Synanon** work, the reason cured addicts and squares alike stay on and on. Ron Cook, 34, is a former Vegas CPA and a **Synanon** vice-president (he was even president during one period until Dederich took the title back). Cook says, "Dederich is an incredible force. He talks in a language I can understand. He is actually as soft as he appears to be rough, a wonderfully sensitive person. I've found an environment here that gives me a sense of direction. I can live like a rich person and have meaning in my life too."

Critics of Dederich's rule appear to be almost nonexistent, because most who have left, like nonpersons in the Soviet, are never mentioned again. One woman, who will not allow her name to be used because she is "afraid of Dederich," left **Synanon** after eight years. "Sometimes Chuck is extraordinarily compassionate and kind," she says. "But at other times he's cruel and vindictive. You never know which way he will swing. People who want to leave **Synanon** are considered crazy. You can talk about anything in a **Synanon** game except your own terrible conflicts overstaying in **Synanon**."

Residents and alumni agree on one thing about Dederich: at **Synanon** his authority is absolute. In 1970 he gave up smoking and decided everyone else should too. More than 150 members could not or would not stop and were expelled. Several more left recently when he decided all the residents should diet. (Dederich lost 50 pounds, but at 201 says he is still that much overweight.)

A possible ban on babies at **Synanon** is an extension of a 1970 Dederich order that pregnant women had to move into a gestation compound called the Hatchery at the beginning of their seventh month. Husbands may visit at any time, but the women must remain there until the baby is six months old. "It

removes the father from some unpleasant aspects," Dederich says, "like getting up for the 2 o'clock feeding." His paralyzed face breaks into a lopsided grin. "We don't know if it's a good idea or not, but we're trying it. Nothing is sacred just because it's been done for a million years."

PHOTO (COLOR):The Dederichs assemble at **Synanon's** installation in Badger, Calif. Third wife Betty embraces Chuck's son, Charles ("Dede"), and daughter, Cecilia Jason ("Jady").

PHOTO (COLOR):"I am not concerned about my authority," says **Synanon** founder Chuck Dederich. The reason? "There has never been any questioning of it."

PHOTO (COLOR):Even the children play the **Synanon** Game. If a kid misbehaves, he is put in the "Punk Squad," taken out of school and assigned to dishwashing 10 hours a day.

PHOTO (COLOR):The foundation's huge semis are used to deliver **Synanon** merchandising specialties and hustle goods from big companies.

PHOTO (COLOR):Chuck pilots one of the vehicles that he considers more useful than his Cadillac. He recently led a bike safari to Seattle.

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By Barbara Wilkins

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