

Announcer ([00:03](#)):

C13 Originals.

Celena Wittman ([00:07](#)):

My mother's brother reached out to my father, saying, "Hey, we would love to have Selena come out and visit us, come play with her cousins." My dad said, "Sure." They were in Riverside at the time, and my father drove me out there and then left me and said I would be picked up in a couple of days. Later that night, there was a knock at the door and my uncle went to go answer it. And when he opened the door, there were these two strange women standing on the doorstep and they were both dressed very similar to each other. They were wearing jean jackets and hoop earrings, but they had bald heads.

Celena Wittman ([00:59](#)):

My immediate reaction was that they were dangerous. Maybe they were there to rob us. I thought my uncle was going to shut the door in their faces and lock the door and call the police. And instead he invited these two very odd looking women into the house. And I remember just kind of standing in the hall, peeping out, watching my uncle and aunt sitting and talking with these women. And I was thinking, "Who are these people?" But as I was watching the women, one of them began to look familiar to me. And I'm looking at her face and it suddenly occurs to me that could be my mom. Is that my mom?

Celena Wittman ([01:55](#)):

And so I came out and interjected myself into the conversation and I said, "Excuse me, are you my mom?" And then she turned to me and she said, "Yes, yes, I'm your mom." She gave me a hug. And she said, "I've come here to take you with me, and you're going to come live with me in Synanon." It was February of 1977 and I was six years old. She sounded very excited, and for me it was confusing because I literally had not seen her for two and a half years. All I knew is that my mom had gone to this place called Synanon, but I didn't know what to make of that. At that point, when I hadn't seen her in all this time that had gone by, I was thinking to myself, "If it is my mom, why is her head shaved?"

Celena Wittman ([02:58](#)):

My mother is very beautiful. She's Creole. She sort of looks a little bit like Natalie Wood and she had long brown hair that was slightly wavy and it came down to past her shoulders. You have such a drastic change to her physical appearance. It was just very odd, very, very strange to me. But once my mom was interacting with me and I could feel her love and everything, I was excited to leave with her. We spent the night in this hotel and then the next morning we got on this Greyhound-style bus, my mom and I were sitting together just being really close to each other and rediscovering that affection that we had between ourselves.

Celena Wittman ([03:53](#)):

I remember her unbraiding my hair and brushing it over and over again. And we rode on that bus all day and it took us to Northern California, out to Petaluma, way out in the country and the ranch lands, very different from South Central Los Angeles, which is what I was familiar with. We get off this bus and we walked down this gravel road. I remember that we were surrounded by hills with these little shrubby trees and a few little buildings and then just this quiet. I felt like we had taken this long bus ride to a place that felt like nowhere, and then we got to this one building. We walked up to it. We didn't knock on the door or anything.

Celena Wittman ([04:53](#)):

We just went in and there were these children and the children were dressed like the adults. They had shaved heads and they were wearing overalls. They were all just sitting there on the floor quietly and they were waiting for me. The children came up to me and started touching me. They were just crowding around me. They were just thirsty to touch me. They were especially interested in my hair. Everybody wanted to touch my hair. My mom pulled this hairbrush out of her purse and handed it over. They said, "Everybody will get a turn to brush Selena's hair, but you need to stand in line." I stood there while each child had a chance to run the brush through my hair.

Celena Wittman ([05:53](#)):

There was that strange feeling coming over me of I don't know if I quite want to be here anymore. After the kids were done brushing my hair, my mom said she had to leave and that she would be back later and I didn't like that at all. As far as I was concerned, if my mom left, I should be going with her. To think that she's going to now leave me with these people, it became really scary. And then she left and then this woman told me to come with her. She took me into this large bathroom and she said that she was going to make me a Synanon child and that I was going to be beautiful. She opened a drawer and pulled out some scissors and she just started to cut all my hair off, and then she took out some Clippers and she shaved my head. She was telling me that I was now beautiful, and I remember looking in the mirror and just not recognizing myself. I was in shock, feeling like, okay, things have gone very, very wrong.

Sari Crawford ([07:25](#)):

You're probably wondering, "What exactly is Synanon?" That's a good question and I guess it really all depends on who you ask. Some people would tell you that it's the reason they're still alive. Some would say it was a cutting edge social experiment. To many people, it was a religion. To others. It was a revolution, but almost everyone will tell you that what it became was a violent cult. The truth is that at various times it was all of those things, but before it was any of those things, it was only one thing. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that it was one person. The founder of Synanon, a man named Charles E. Dederich, who most people called Chuck.

News Announcer ([08:17](#)):

The house leaders, all former addicts gather in the office of Synanon's director, Chuck Dederich.

Charles E. Dederich ([08:23](#)):

When a person comes in to Synanon, we have then a person that is looking for someone to tell him what to do, just like children.

Sari Crawford ([08:39](#)):

Chuck founded Synanon as a first of its kind drug rehab with a radical claim. He could cure your addiction.

Synanon Resident ([08:47](#)):

He's 52 years old. He's deaf in one ear. He's an ego maniac, but one of the wisest persons that I've ever met in my life.

Synanon Resident 2 ([08:58](#)):

I'm quite convinced that he actually knows more about me than I know about myself. I think he has a very strange gift. He's magic, I think.

Synanon Resident 3 ([09:06](#)):

Oh, I think he's marvelous. I feel like I owe him my life.

Sari Crawford ([09:11](#)):

Then, Chuck made an even more radical claim. He could cure any of your problems. All you had to do was move in.

News Announcer 2 ([09:19](#)):

With success, came others, middle class people, professionals, non-addicts, who simply sought a different way of life. They found it in Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([09:29](#)):

And wherever Chuck went, his people followed.

Synanon Resident 4 ([09:32](#)):

I think that he could lead people anywhere that he wanted to. He's that forceful a human being.

Sari Crawford ([09:38](#)):

But Chuck was leading his followers down a path of destruction.

Charles E. Dederich ([09:43](#)):

Many, many thousands of people are indebted to Synanon, and I have no way of being responsible for what they might do. If they consider it a threat, that's their problem. I think it's kind of decent of me to warn them.

News Announcer 3 ([09:58](#)):

Then the controversy over Dederich and Synanon has been growing for several years. Dederich seems to have changed and changed the organization as well.

News Announcer 4 ([10:06](#)):

It wants to be classified as a religion and some of the activities on its land have come to the attention of the authority.

News Announcer 5 ([10:12](#)):

Synanon is arming itself with \$63,000 worth of guns and ammunition. Is that why you have the security forces around?

Charles E. Dederich ([10:19](#)):

Your damned right. Yes.

News Announcer 4 ([10:21](#)):

The number of violent incidents involving outsiders who crossed Synanon's path has increased sharply.

Former Synanon Member ([10:27](#)):

Chuck Dederich walked in and he said, "I want that one's legs broken, and I want you to shove him in the back of his car and run it off the pier."

Former Synanon Member 2 ([10:35](#)):

The one man came up there and told us we had to take them both out and shoot them. That's his exact words. Hell, I thought they was for real. They was going to kill us.

Charles E. Dederich ([10:43](#)):

We never start anything. We never do and never have, but nobody is going to mess with us. Nobody.

Sari Crawford ([11:00](#)):

There isn't just one way to describe Synanon and there isn't just one way to tell the story of Synanon, either. It's the story of Chuck Dederich, but it isn't only his story. Thousands of people passed through Synanon during its decades of existence, during its existence on paper, anyway. Whether or not Synanon ever really ended is another one of those questions that all depends on who you ask, and who better to answer than the people who lived it? This is an attempt to turn the story of Synanon over to them, because it's their story.

Sari Crawford ([11:36](#)):

And me? I'm one of those people too. My name is Sarah Crawford, and this is the Sunshine Place. I didn't grow up in Synanon, but my life is defined by it in so many ways, same as the people who lived there, like my family. My parents lived in Synanon for many years. That's where they met and fell in love, and they left Synanon together, but they could never really leave it behind. I'd ask them about it years later, but I could tell it was too raw and too painful to put themselves back there. I've always wanted to know the real story, the whole story, my story, but it isn't only for me to tell. It's for people like Selena Whitman

Sari Crawford ([12:36](#)):

Selena's mother had taken her to Synanon's facility near Tomales Bay, which is about 50 miles north of San Francisco along Highway 1, in west Marin County, California. It's an unbelievably beautiful part of the country, but very rural and very remote. Selena spent her first night at Synanon with the other children in a girl's dormitory, which was part of the Synanon school. She didn't know where her mother was. The next day, now looking like everybody else, wearing overalls and with a shaved head, Selena and the other kids were gathered together by a demonstrator, which is what the adults in the Synanon school were called. Selena's mother was there too.

Celena Wittman ([13:22](#)):

I was told by one of the demonstrators that we were all going to play a game. And the other children, they started to grab some chairs and they were placed in a circle. We all took our seats and the demonstrator then opened up the game, saying that this was a place where we could talk about our feelings and talk about anything that we wanted to. And it was also a place to get out your anger about

things and that you could use whatever words you wanted. And that even if I wanted to use cuss words, I could use those words too.

Celena Wittman (14:05):

My mom was already there before the game was set up. The demonstrator told me that all of the adults are called by their first names and that we don't use mom and dad, those titles, and that from now on, I should call my mom by her name, Teresa. And so the demonstrator said she would go ahead and start the game. And so she began talking to my mom and just said some very unkind things to my mom. She was telling her that she wasn't a good mother, and look what you've done to your daughter. She was just really vicious. There was a kind of attack on my mom's character as a mother, and I just didn't really understand the savagery of the whole thing.

Kid Playing The Game (15:03):

It makes me sick. You're the only one who fucking seems to go down the drain man.

Celena Wittman (15:10):

And so then the other children took notice of this, and so then they kind of jumped in.

Kid Playing The Game (15:15):

And then she... Oh no, no, no, no, no.

Celena Wittman (15:19):

And so it was basically a lot of arguing back and forth and them screaming at each other.

Kid Playing The Game (15:29):

I didn't fucking hide, anyway. You fucking act like a little kid and say, "I'll fix you..."

Celena Wittman (15:29):

After a while she silenced them, and then she told me I could talk to my mom and tell my mom exactly how I was feeling, because I probably had a lot of anger inside of me that my mom had been away for so long, but that's not really the way that I was feeling about my mother. I didn't really know what she was talking about, and I couldn't really participate. I didn't want to participate. It was just very upsetting for me.

Kid Playing The Game (16:00):

I warned [inaudible 00:16:01] about you. You're getting to be such a little spoiled bitch, bragging all the fucking time.

Celena Wittman (16:07):

Then the game went on and the kids continued to scream at each other and they just seemed crazy to me. Everything seemed crazy.

Kid Playing The Game (16:23):

After this game, I'm going to go call you, you fucking bitch. Oh, fuck you. Fuck him, fuck...

Celena Wittman ([16:23](#)):

Eventually the demonstrator said, "Okay, we're going to wrap up everything. The game's over. Good game. We're done." And kids start coming up to me and shaking my hand. That was a good game. You'll get better at it. Don't worry. And I was wondering, what does this mean? Did somebody win something or what? Everything was just so confusing. And then somebody came out with this little cake and they started singing to me. "It's your Synanon birthday." (Singing) It didn't make any sense. We were somewhere in February and my birthday is in October. It was upsetting, as I was standing there, holding this cake, celebrating a birthday for myself that in my mind didn't really exist.

Celena Wittman ([17:36](#)):

It's hard for me to convey, even, that feeling that I had but if you could imagine that maybe you got in a car and you drove somewhere and suddenly you're on another planet. It was dawning on me that it didn't look like I was going to be going home. I was going to be staying in this place.

Mike Gimble ([18:18](#)):

You end up in this twilight state. You're not unconscious, but you're not totally conscious, and there's a space in the middle that you feel so good. It feels warm. It feels almost loving. You're breathing, but you don't know if you're breathing. You feel close to people. You have this sense of power, of self-worth, and even though it didn't last long, you never forget it. And so you want to do it again. And so you're always chasing it, over and over. Here I am in Ocean City, Maryland, using heroin for the first time in the summer of the 11th grade, and I don't know what addiction really was.

Sari Crawford ([19:12](#)):

Mike Gimble is approaching 50 years of sobriety, but back in 1968, as a teenager living in the suburbs of Baltimore, he was quickly turning from heroin user to heroin addict.

Mike Gimble ([19:26](#)):

You learn to use the needle to actually increase the high because you can pull it back and push it in and pull it back, and push. And every time you do that, you get this warm rush through your body, every time you do that. You're not only getting addicted to the drug itself, being a powerful narcotic, you're also getting addicted to the process, heating it up, making sure it's clean, putting the strap around your arm, finding a vein. It's all part of a ritual and you get into it so much. And I did it again and did it again and did it again all summer. Went back to my senior year at high school and I was addicted to heroin. I was never not high. One day, about 11 o'clock in the morning at school, I started to feel sick. I felt horrible. Heroin withdrawal makes you feel like you have the flu. You just feel so bad. All you think about is how do I get money and how do I get more heroin so you're not sick. That was it. That was the lifestyle, 24/7.

Sari Crawford ([20:39](#)):

Mike's habit got so bad that he'd shoplift and rob houses to get money for heroin. It didn't take long for Mike to get arrested, and then he kept getting arrested. But his parents were in denial until his dad caught him shooting up in their bathroom. They tried to get him help, but there weren't a lot of options back then, besides jails and mental hospitals. They just paid, for bail, for lawyers and for the money he owed to drug dealers.

Mike Gimble ([21:10](#)):

I took my family broke. I mean, they lost everything and it just continued. My mother would always say that when I would go out at night, they would lie in bed and pray to God that God would take my life and put everyone out of this misery. And then as soon as I got home, they would thank God I was safe. That's what parents go through. Back then, we called them the Black mafia in Baltimore, and I ripped them off for \$5,000 and a suitcase full of drugs and I had parked in front of my parents' house. Right before I went outside, literally 10 seconds before I went out the door, the house shook. I just heard this giant explosion. I go out and there's my car on fire. They had put a Molotov cocktail. They blew my car up in front of my parents' house. I reached that point where my parents finally said, "If you don't do something, we're going to kill you ourself."

Sari Crawford ([22:20](#)):

Mike's dad reached out to an old musician friend who was a recovered addict. He mentioned this place out in California that might be able to help. It was called Synanon.

Mike Gimble ([22:35](#)):

I got on the plane with a bottle of Quaaludes and I got totally wasted. Got to LA, started stumbling around, ended up in the middle of the street. The police picked me up and said, basically, they were going to lock me up. Somehow I kept mumbling, "Synanon, Synanon, Synanon." And the cops, instead of taking me in and busting me, they put me in a taxi cab and told the cab driver to drop me on the steps of Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([23:11](#)):

Remember what I told you earlier about Synanon, about how it's difficult to define and how it all depends on who you ask? Well, if you ask somebody like Mike Gimble, Synanon was something of a last resort, a place where a rock bottom drug addict, or in Synanon terms, a dope fiend, went to get help. Synanon was more than a decade old and it had facilities all across the country, but it was based primarily in California. Its headquarters in Santa Monica was the Del Mar Club, a former luxury hotel overlooking the beach where Pico Boulevard hits the Pacific ocean. That's where Mike was dropped off by the taxi.

Mike Gimble ([23:52](#)):

And the first thing they said to me was, "We're going to cut your hair and we're going to cut your beard." And I said, "Screw you." And I left. And I started walking down the beach and leaving, and this gentleman came running down the beach and he got me and he said, "Hey man, what are you doing? Give it a chance. We'll give you a good meal, clean you up a little bit, and then we'll take it from there. Just stay." And I said, "Okay." And I went back, and to this day, I don't know what happened in my own brain, but I went into Synanon on October 1st, 1972, and that was the last day I've ever used drugs.

Sari Crawford ([24:43](#)):

Mike moved into Synanon that day, but not long after he sobered up, he and all the other newcomers, about 50 of them, were moved somewhere else.

Mike Gimble ([24:53](#)):

We went to this old warehouse about a mile away from the beach house, and it was a big warehouse with dorms and it was a mini boot camp. They were experimenting with taking addicts and in two months having them march like soldiers. And they got us up, five o'clock in the morning, and had us go out to the park and exercise, and they taught us how to march. And we had to learn how to make our beds properly. They literally would come and bounce a quarter off your bed. You had to roll your underwear and roll your socks, just like the military. The shell shock of it all was something that I guess... I don't know. I guess I enjoyed it. I got into it for some reason. Being an addict, I still wanted that immediate gratification, and I was able to get that from marching. I was able to get that from making a good bed, where people would look and say, "Oh, you did good. You did good. You did good." And I liked that feeling, and so I guess I just kept doing it.

Mike Gimble ([26:06](#)):

They had a slogan that said, basically, you do as you're told until such time you can tell someone else what to do. I think what they were doing at that point was probably genius when it came to dealing with drug addicts, because as a drug addict, we live off of our gut. It's kind of like a newborn baby. It just operates off of pure gut, and that's how addicts are. Our brains were mush from the drugs. We didn't go in there as really together people. We didn't know what the hell was going on, and so I was buying into this thing all the way.

Person Playing The Game ([26:45](#)):

What have you learned? Nothing.

Mike Gimble ([26:47](#)):

Then they gave you one outlet every day, the Synanon game, where you get in a circle with the people that you worked with, people you live with. And if you got any beefs that you were holding in, you had a chance to verbally kick some butt.

Person Playing The Game ([27:05](#)):

You're a low life creep. You know that?

Mike Gimble ([27:08](#)):

You could talk to anybody in the group. Everyone was equal and you could say anything you want, except you couldn't threaten violence.

Person Playing The Game ([27:16](#)):

A no class bastard, that's what you are. A no class passes.

Mike Gimble ([27:19](#)):

And the whole concept was very cathartic. You were able to get out a lot of that rage.

Person Playing The Game ([27:24](#)):

That's all you'll ever be.

Mike Gimble ([27:25](#)):

It was easy for me to play the Synanon game because I had a loud voice. And at these early days, whoever had a loud voice would play the game better, because there are a lot of people that were terrified, would never say a word, because they were scared

Person Playing The Game ([27:41](#)):

This is what you want to know, and I'm telling you.

Mike Gimble ([27:43](#)):

The group pressure, whether it was to support or go against, was very powerful. But all the time, whether it was in the game or out of the game, everyone would say, "If you leave here, you're going to die. If you leave here, you're going to fall in a manhole," meaning you're going to use drugs, and you're going to die.

Sari Crawford ([28:08](#)):

All of these experiences that Mike was having and all of the concepts that he was learning, they all came from the ideas and teachings of Chuck Dederich. Everything in Synanon did. When Chuck spoke, you listened, and most times you acted.

Mike Gimble ([28:25](#)):

Chuck Dederich, the founder, the guru. We called him. the old man. You were told about it. You'd hear about him. There are pictures everywhere. You knew he was a bigger than life figure. You knew he created the place. And we knew that he lived up on the mountain, up in Tomales Bay, at Home Place. And the people that were in Home Place were special because they were closer to him.

Sari Crawford ([28:53](#)):

Mike mentioned the Home Place. Synanon had their own terminology for everything, almost like their own language. The Home Place was wherever Chuck lived. When Mike came to Synanon, Chuck lived in Tomales Bay.

Mike Gimble ([29:09](#)):

When he came down to Santa Monica, it was like the president of the United States was coming. We cleaned everything and we got everything ready and special food. And I remember that we were in front of the Beach Club on the street and everyone was saying, "Okay, they'll be here in five minutes. They'll be here." And next thing we know here comes 20 motorcycles and a couple trucks behind it, and this caravan comes pulling up. He pulls up front and everyone wanted to grab a look. It was like the Messiah was coming down to grace us in Santa Monica. Well, we had to put on a marching display for him. I remember we did a really nice job and he commended us and said nice things and all that kind of stuff. It was a very special occasion. And everyone took it that way, and it was really a big deal.

Mike Gimble ([30:09](#)):

I don't know what happened to my brain or what happened to me, but I did really well in the warehouse bootcamp. And I was looked at as a rising star and they took four or five of us to Tomales Bay, the Home Place, where Dederich was. And they were sending us to the big original bootcamp, and that was a prize. That was something special. We had real uniforms and overalls. Our thing was we had to work harder, work faster, be better than everyone else. We're looked at as an elite group. People gave you a lot of

respect and whenever we would march through the facility, everyone would come out and watch. Well, we would go "Your left, right, left. Your left, right, left. Who were we? Bootcamp. We are we? In Synanon. One, two." And then you have to turn around. "To the rear, march."

Mike Gimble ([31:07](#)):

Synanon is paved with gold. Synanon is paved with gold. The more you stay, the more you get. The more you stay, the more you get. That kind of stuff. Within a couple of months of being there, I got put in charge of the bootcamp. Synanon is paved with gold. Synanon is paved with gold. Being head of the bootcamp, brought me the ability to get more things, better place to live. I had my own room this time. The more you stay, the more you get. The more you stay, the more you get. At some point, they even gave you money each month, called WAM, walk around money. Synanon is paved with gold. And we got to hang out a little more with the founder.

Mike Gimble ([31:51](#)):

The food was better. The air was better and you were treated better. Everything was just a little better, which made you question less and be more dedicated to Synanon. The more you stay, the more you get. You were a soldier. When someone would mention being brainwashed Dederich would say, "Well, your brains needed to be washed." I was a teenager, then a drug addict. That's all I ever knew. Now I was definitely addicted to being in Synanon. The more you stay, the more you get. The more you stay, the more you get.

Celena Wittman ([32:42](#)):

I didn't really see my mom for quite a while. Maybe weeks went by or a month or more. All I know is that my mom left. I didn't even know where she left to, and I was just on my own. These letters would arrive sometimes. One day one was given to me and I opened it and it was from my mom.

Sari Crawford ([33:11](#)):

Selena's mom wrote that she was living at Synanon facility in San Francisco. Selena was in Tomales Bay, at the same place where Mike Gimble went to run the bootcamp.

Celena Wittman ([33:23](#)):

There was one particular demonstrator where I did ask her if I could see my mom and I used her first name. I said, "When will I see Theresa again?" I thought, "Well, maybe if I ask in this way, she might give me some answers." But she really didn't like me asking at all, and she said that in a sense she was not my mother. They didn't want me pining away for my mom or asking for my mom because they said I had mothers in the school and that should be good enough for me. And she just wanted to get it clear to me that she didn't really want me asking about her anymore.

Sari Crawford ([34:11](#)):

After a while Selena's mom got permission to visit.

Celena Wittman ([34:15](#)):

When I would see my mother, I would talk in this baby-like way. I remember at one point, my mom asking me, "Why are you talking like that?" And I didn't really have an answer for her, and I don't think I understood it. I asked my mom if she ever breastfed me. And she said, "Well, yeah." She did. I wanted to

try it again. I asked her if I could try to nurse from her. And so she let me, and so she lifted her top and she pulled her breast out. And all I did was I just put my tongue on her breast and then I felt really strange. This is weird. And then she said, "Are you finished?" And I said, "Yeah." And then she put her breast away. That was the end of it.

Celena Wittman ([35:11](#)):

And I think my mom saw I needed to play out this thing, and that she kind of understood that. Now, looking back on it, I feel like it was just my way of trying to process what was going on and maybe go back in time a little bit to when I was very little and it was just my mom and I, before Synanon ever happened.

Sari Crawford ([35:43](#)):

Selena and her mom moved around a lot before she went to Synanon. Sometimes they stayed with Selena's grandmother in South Central Los Angeles. Sometimes they stayed with different boyfriends that her mom had. Their circumstances were tough, but they were close.

Celena Wittman ([36:01](#)):

I do have some memories of my mom being catatonic. And I think that came from the pharmaceuticals that she was given for her depression. She would have these states of just locking up where she couldn't talk. She couldn't really move and she would just be frozen. From my mother, I'd kind of internalized this sadness that she was feeling inside.

Sari Crawford ([36:32](#)):

Selena's parents split up before she was born, but they stayed friends. Her father knew about Theresa's depression and that it was getting worse. He wanted to help and he remembered this place that he heard about in Santa Monica called Synanon. It had started as a drug rehab, but now it was more like a commune that could help all kinds of people who were struggling with all kinds of problems, and on Saturday nights they had parties that anybody could go to.

Celena Wittman ([37:01](#)):

And so my dad said, "Oh, I'll go and check it out." And he really liked it. There was the free music. There was the dancing. There was the pretty women that he wanted to meet, all of that. And then he said there was this other element of these bald people walking around, wearing overalls and stuff, trying to talk up Synanon, trying to recruit you into their organization. He would just kind of take it in and brush it aside, like, "Yeah, yeah. Oh, you're going to take over the world? Oh, great." And then just kind of push it aside and go off and dance and have a nice time.

Sari Crawford ([37:46](#)):

Selena's dad told her mom that she should check out Synanon for herself, but to stay away from the people with the bald heads and the overalls.

Celena Wittman ([37:54](#)):

She showed up there and when she met the Synanon people, it was a completely different experience for her. What she saw was people that seemed like they were kind of enlightened. People are getting along from different classes, different ethnic backgrounds, different cultures. There was something

there that she wanted to examine and get to know better. When she told my dad, he was like, "Oh God, I told you not to get involved with these people. They're kind of kooky, but if that's what you want to do..."

Sari Crawford ([38:35](#)):

Selena's mom there moved in as a lifestyler, a Synanon term. That meant she wasn't a drug addict. Instead, she was a "square" who wanted to live in Synanon to be like those people she met at Saturday night parties, Selena went to live with her father and she didn't see her mother again until two years later on the night she showed up on her uncle's doorstep.

Celena Wittman ([39:00](#)):

When she had been in the community for a little while, she was really missing me, and my mom ended up joining this support group that was started by parents who were working on trying to bring their children into Synanon and they named it the Kid Snatchers. If a grandparent or maybe the other parent of the child said no, they were not going to cooperate, then the next plan would be to kidnap that child and bring them into Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([39:42](#)):

But now that Selena was in Synanon, they still hardly saw each other, and when they did those moments were fleeting.

Celena Wittman ([39:51](#)):

Eventually I kind of got used to that. I didn't see her that often, but when I did see her, it was very, very special, especially in comparison to my day-to-day life. We had inspection every morning. There was a demonstrator that would come through with a cow bell.

Mike Gimble ([40:13](#)):

Left, right, left.

Celena Wittman ([40:14](#)):

We would all go and stand at attention at our beds, standing very erect with your arms at your side, like little soldiers.

Mike Gimble ([40:22](#)):

Synanon is paved with gold.

Celena Wittman ([40:24](#)):

The demonstrator would go from room to room and she would check everything.

Mike Gimble ([40:29](#)):

The more you stay, the more you get.

Celena Wittman ([40:31](#)):

I remember she always had a coin or something that she would drop on the bed and see if it bounced a certain way.

Mike Gimble ([40:38](#)):

Your left, right, left.

Sari Crawford ([40:41](#)):

The military influence that Mike Gimble spoke about earlier had seeped into almost every aspect of life in Synanon, right down to the children in the Synanon school.

Celena Wittman ([40:52](#)):

Our physical education was quite rigorous. Sometimes we would run up and down the highway. If anyone was caught walking, they would have to start all the way from the beginning and do the run all over again. We ran in all sorts of weather. If it was storming outside and the wind and the rain is in your face and there's little blocks of hail, you ran in that. If it was blazing hot, we were running. You just ran. There was an emphasis on the kids being strong and really physically fit and superior, in some way. Chuck had this idea that he wanted to raise super children to protect Synanon and that we were going to form a young Synanon army.

Sari Crawford ([41:53](#)):

This is a recreation of a tape recording made by Chuck Dederich in 1977, the same year that Selena arrived in Synanon.

Charles E. Dederich ([42:01](#)):

And I keep thinking of the militant posture, militant defenses. Don't tread on me. I think that is what we must do.

Sari Crawford ([42:15](#)):

From the very beginning, Chuck Dederich had two main rules for his followers in Synanon, no drugs or alcohol and no physical violence of any kind. Over time, both of those rules would be shattered, along with the lives of the people who called it home, my family included.

Charles E. Dederich ([42:40](#)):

And I think that we could, without too much effort, get a reputation that would be all over the United States within one year's time. Don't fuck with Synanon in any way. Don't mess with us. You can get killed dead, physically dead.

Sari Crawford ([43:10](#)):

Next time on the Sunshine Place.

Synanon Member ([43:12](#)):

I never met anybody like Chuck. His personality was overwhelming.

Sari Crawford ([43:18](#)):

This transcript was exported on Aug 25, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

We go all the way back to the beginning. Chuck brings Synanon to life and his followers line up behind him.

Synanon Member ([43:23](#)):

I never met a person who had the charisma, the ability just to fold in people, into his orbit.

Sari Crawford ([43:34](#)):

Not everyone embraces Synanon.

Synanon Member ([43:36](#)):

Everybody had washed their hands of addicts. Once an addict, always an addict.

Sari Crawford ([43:41](#)):

But Chuck has a vision and he knows how to sell it.

Charles E. Dederich ([43:44](#)):

You wait and see, those three syllables, Synanon they're going to be a household word, as familiar to the world as Coca-Cola.

Sari Crawford ([43:56](#)):

Thank you for listening to the Sunshine Place, a creation and presentation of C13 Originals, a Cadence13 studio. Executive produced by Robert Downey, Jr., Susan Downey, and Emily Barclay Ford for Team Downey, Chris Corcoran, and Zak Levitt of Cadence13 and Josh McLaughlin. Written and directed by Perry Crowell of C13 Originals. Editing by Alistair Schurman and Perry Crowell with production and editing assistance by Chris Basil and Ian Mandt. Mixing and mastering by Bill Schultz. Narrated by me, Sari Crawford. Original music by Joel Goodman. Marketing, PR, production coordination, sales and operations by Moira Curran, Josefina Francis, Curt Courtney, Hillary Schupf, Lauren Viera, Lucas Sandstroen, Sean Cherry, Lizzy Roberti and Danny Kertrick of Cadence13. Cadence13 is an Audacy Company.