

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

C13Originals.

Alvina Gambonini ([00:08](#)):

At that time, my dad had two ranches. The main ranch we lived at was 1,400 acres. The second ranch bordered where Synanon was, so we're right next to each other.

Sari Crawford ([00:21](#)):

This is Alvina Gambonini. Her father Alvin was a third-generation cattle rancher in West Marin County. The Gambonini's were there long before Synanon first showed up in the 1960s.

Alvina Gambonini ([00:33](#)):

They were very friendly. I remember them inviting us for dinner a few times, just to get to know us. They were very neighborly.

Sari Crawford ([00:43](#)):

Here's Bob Gambonini, Alvina's older brother.

Bob Gambonini ([00:47](#)):

They were here for years on the Marconi property. Then they purchased the [Majeti 00:00:53] ranch and then they purchased another ranch, and all of a sudden they started growing.

Sari Crawford ([01:02](#)):

When Synanon was new in Marin County, Bob and his dad Alvin would help them with the basics of ranch life. They offered advice, lent equipment, and even gave them a cow. But by the mid 1970s, it seemed like Synanon didn't need their help anymore.

Bob Gambonini ([01:19](#)):

It was really noticeable with their building. They've constructed and they had Mercedes Benz buses. They had vans and there's constant traffic, day and night. I mean, in this community we aren't used to seeing that. It's like, whoa, this is different.

Sari Crawford ([01:39](#)):

Synanon stopped inviting the Gambonini's to dinner, but the Gambonini's started getting visitors from Synanon. They were kids but they were cold, hungry, and tired and they showed up in the middle of the night.

Alvina Gambonini ([01:54](#)):

I mean, it could be two or three in the morning and there'd be a knock at the door. I remember, they would come in and they would tell their story. They said how it was almost like a boot camp, maybe worse. It had to be pretty terrible for some of them to be escaping during the middle of the night. And Synanon would tell the kids that we had guns in our house and my dad would shoot them if they came to the house. But I believe some of them thought, what do they have to lose? My dad would actually take some to the bus stop and give them money to go home. There was one incident, a boy. He was at

our house until daylight. He called his parents. They did come to pick him up, but we watched when they drove, they turned around and brought their son back to Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([02:46](#)):

The Gambonini's relationship with Synanon grew contentious.

Bob Gambonini ([02:50](#)):

They put in a giant water tank and they ran pipes from the springs, and took the water through our property and piped it into their water tanks on their property. They would actually cut the locks on the gate to get to the top of the hill where they were going to make their air strip. It's like, what do you need an air strip for? At some point there got to be bad blood.

Sari Crawford ([03:21](#)):

One summer night in 1975, the Gambonini's were on their way home from a meeting in town. Bob and Alvina, who were 15 and 10 years old at the time, were in the car along with their parents and their other sister. Alvin leased one of his ranches to a family named the [Cabrals 00:03:37], who were on vacation. While they were away, they asked Alvin to check on their son, Victor, who stayed behind. It was the property that shared a border with Synanon.

Bob Gambonini ([03:48](#)):

There's a big, long bridge. You cross over the big, long bridge and the dairy is located right on the left-hand side of the road. So we were just going to turn around and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, there was an army truck full of people, and there was pickups and cars. And these people all jumped out and there were guys with machetes. They all had shaved heads, so we knew they were Synanon people and they started surrounding the car. That's when I got scared and ran.

Alvina Gambonini ([04:26](#)):

I was asleep in the front seat of the car. My dad's in the driver's side, my mom on the passenger's side. I was in between them. But when I woke up, they were throwing punches at my dad. The window was down so I just remember arms coming in. They were trying to pull my dad out of the car, but my mom was on the other side trying to keep him in. I remember my dad holding onto the steering wheel. Synanon is trying to grab the keys. My mom pulled those out and she's trying to protect, put her arm to protect my dad's face. I just remember they kept throwing punches and they wouldn't let up.

Bob Gambonini ([05:07](#)):

I just ran, trying to get up to the house. I pounded on the door, pounded on the door and Victor was home. He opened the door and he goes, "What's wrong? What's wrong? What's going on?" I said, "They got my dad. They got my dad." He's like, "Who? When?" So we jumped in his truck and when we went back down with the truck, we couldn't even see the car. There were so many people around. It was more than when I had left, and that's when they started surrounding us. At the end of the big, long bridge, there was a dump truck blocking the whole county road, and they had the other end of that road blocked too. So we were boxed in. Victor just slammed it in reverse and floored it, and backed all the way up to his house to get help.

Alvina Gambonini ([05:57](#)):

People were surrounding the car and jumping on the back, trying to break the back windshield, just like animals. I remember a vehicle ramming into our car, that it was enough to push the car. I think they were trying to push it so we couldn't take off and leave. I remember my mom screaming, my sister screaming. Then I, of course, started to scream, but it was just mayhem. I remember their eyes, a glare in their eyes so angry and so violent. If my brother didn't get out for help, I have no idea what would have happened or how long it would have kept going on, because nothing was going to stop them.

Sari Crawford ([06:53](#)):

My name is Sari Crawford and this is The Sunshine Place.

Julie Roberts ([07:10](#)):

When my parents divorced, me and my mom and my two younger sisters were living in a house that my grandparents had purchased for us. My mother had been attending the Saturday night parties and playing the Synanon game.

Musician ([07:25](#)):

[Singing] Let me tell you what's happened down at Synanon.

Julie Roberts ([07:28](#)):

But eventually something changed, which is that she brought a man that she was dating home. He asked her to marry him and wanted her to move into Synanon. She was all for the idea, because Synanon offered what she thought was an award-winning school that psychologists and social workers were studying and writing articles about. I became very excited about going to Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([07:55](#)):

This is Julie Roberts, Julie Moncharsh, back in 1971 when she was nine years old and she moved into the Del Mar Club in Santa Monica with her mom and two sisters. Her mom sold their house and gave all the money to Synanon.

Julie Roberts ([08:12](#)):

I had envisioned that I would be moving into a community and would have an apartment with my mom maybe, and the sisters. I just somehow thought we'd all be in the same room or in the same house. But instead my mother was roomed with her new husband and then the children were separated by age. I didn't see my sisters at all, ever. They said that the community will raise your children. Our children do not need their mothers and their fathers. The community is their mother and their father.

Sari Crawford ([08:51](#)):

Synanon kids saw their parents on average for three hours a week. Chuck saw this as an experiment. He felt that communal living in Synanon was a better alternative to the nuclear family.

Chuck Dederich ([09:04](#)):

I think concentrating on the children is the problem. Our values have produced a world today that is on the verge of being ruined for human habitation. That is the result of the way our parents raised us.

Sari Crawford ([09:19](#)):

The Synanon school became an experiment as well.

Chuck Dederich ([09:23](#)):

Modern education is pretty much a failure. I think the children, probably like other animals, will do a much better job to educate themselves, if we devote our efforts to monkeying around with the environment.

Sari Crawford ([09:39](#)):

Teachers were called demonstrators, practical skills and trades were taught alongside traditional academics. Students of all ages learned together and older kids helped the younger students, just like old-timer dope fiends helped the newcomers stay clean.

Julie Roberts ([09:54](#)):

We learned things that were way beyond what I would normally have been taught and I was all for it. I was ready. I could learn anything. I was excited.

Sari Crawford ([10:04](#)):

But Julie began to notice a change in the school. Chuck said that the kids lacked structure and discipline. Rules became more strict and punishment was more frequent and harsh. There was a group of 10 boys who were considered troublemakers and one day they didn't show up for school.

Julie Roberts ([10:22](#)):

These 10 boys, they were sent up to Tomales Bay and were assigned to be in the first punk squad.

Sari Crawford ([10:33](#)):

The punk squad was Chuck's latest idea. Synanon was going to take in juvenile delinquents from the court system as an alternative to incarceration. It was also going to be a way for Synanon to validate their core mission of rehabilitation, which might keep the IRS from asking too many questions. But to Julie, the punk squad was just a group of her classmates who were sent away on a bus.

Julie Roberts ([10:57](#)):

They came back to Santa Monica about a month later. We reported to the basketball court and they came in marching, and they were very good at it. We were sitting there watching the punk squad drill, and suddenly the head of the punk squad slammed one of them in the face. I was like, what is going on?

Sari Crawford ([11:25](#)):

What the punk squad demonstrated that day, was that Synanon had fundamentally changed forever. From the beginning there were only two rules, no drugs or alcohol and no violence. The second rule didn't seem to apply anymore. If Julie didn't get the message that day, she would soon. During a group meeting, she was accused of not doing her chores and then lying about it. She was told to stand up in front of all her peers.

Julie Roberts ([11:56](#)):

There was probably 100 boys and girls around my age. I looked around at all of them and I was told to take my glasses off. I was punched and thrown to the ground, and picked up and thrown to the ground, "Get up, get up." "No," and they hit me again and I was shocked. And that was the first time. That sort of thing was happening more and more. So instead of them coming up to me and saying, do 10 pushups, they were slugging me or they were slugging someone else that was being punished in front of us. Suddenly they were allowed to do whatever the hell they wanted to.

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

When Julie was 12 years old, she found a letter on the desk of one of the demonstrators. It was a list of names and hers was on it. More kids were going to be sent to Tomales Bay, where they were going to form something called the girls and boys core. Chuck decided, what was good for the punks was good for all the children. Julie and the other kids on that list packed their bags.

Julie Roberts ([13:13](#)):

Our schedule was basically exercise, and then in the morning and afternoon we were assigned to a specific area to do work. I was often assigned to work in the kitchen. We would work whole morning and lunch, and then we'd go back and finish at dinner.

Sari Crawford ([13:31](#)):

Julie is describing her daily routine in the girls' core in Tomales Bay.

Julie Roberts ([13:37](#)):

We were woken up about five o'clock in the morning, being told to run somewhere, sometimes up enormous mountains. I would get out of breath while they yelled at me.

Musician ([13:50](#)):

Get up.

Julie Roberts ([13:51](#)):

I can't. I can't get my breath.

Musician ([13:54](#)):

Get up.

Julie Roberts ([13:54](#)):

I can't.

Musician ([13:54](#)):

Get up. Get up.

Julie Roberts ([13:55](#)):

I couldn't breathe.

Musician ([13:56](#)):

Get up. Get up.

Julie Roberts ([13:56](#)):

I was like, forget this, I'm stopping. I was not able to participate in things and accepted being punched instead, because I simply couldn't do them.

Sari Crawford ([14:09](#)):

Here's Celena Wittman, who you heard in the first episode when her mom brought her to Synanon and she had her head shaved.

Celena Wittman ([14:17](#)):

There were a lot of situations like that, where a kid just really couldn't keep up and they were forced to do something that they really didn't have the strength for. Buddy Jones was in charge of most of our physical education. He was on the tall side. He was in very good shape. He was quite muscular. There were times that he would laugh and have fun with the kids and kids enjoyed being with him, but he could also be very intimidating. And if he did get angry with you, it was scary. He had this thing where if a kid acted up, he would knock them on their butt, push that kid really hard and they would fly back and wind up on the floor. He did it to me once. I remember being really scared as he walked up to me and pushed me down.

Julie Roberts ([15:18](#)):

I thought Buddy Jones hated me because any interaction I had with him, he was hitting me or yelling at me. He was very kind to certain children. I observed him with other people and they would be having a reasonable conversation. But for someone like me, every interaction that I had with him was calling me to a chair to be spanked, or he's slamming me across the face. I began thinking about ways that I could leave

Sari Crawford ([15:51](#)):

In Synanon, there was a term for that.

Julie Roberts ([15:56](#)):

If you leave the community, you split. Splitting usually means, leaving in the middle of the night and walking either up the mountain or walking down to the Synanon entrance, but there was a guard there so it wasn't always safe. How do you split? There was a way to run away if you knew where you were going, and if you were savvy enough. The Gambonini ranch was across from Walker Creek. It was roughly a mile and a half from the ranch down where we were. We had been told the Gambonini's would kill us. They would torture us before they killed us. I mean, the stories would change about how vicious and crazy the Gambonini's were, and we were afraid.

Sari Crawford ([16:42](#)):

One thing Julie knew for certain is what would happen if she was caught splitting by Synanon.

Julie Roberts ([16:48](#)):

We were at the afternoon meeting. You had most of the kids from the girls core, boys core, and then really just all the Synanon residents that happened to be at Tomales. Buddy Jones and Rod Mullen were

up in the front. Rod Mullen was one of the key people that was there. He was the head of all the basic training and the punk squads. So two boys were in a truck. We were told that they had ran away and they had been caught. So they were brought to this meeting and taken out of the truck and they were viciously beaten, punching in the face, kicking. They fall, they get kicked again. I couldn't believe what was happening. I mean, I'm scared. I don't want to be a part of this. I want to go to a real school. Fuck this. Why am I here? Why am I being treated so badly? I totally did not understand and yet, it kept getting worse and worse.

Sari Crawford ([17:59](#)):

Celena remembers how one young girl was treated when she was caught trying to split.

Celena Wittman ([18:07](#)):

I remember being roughly awoken very early in the morning, it was still dark out, and told to get dressed. Then we were told to sit on the floor. I saw that a lot of the adults had been woken up from their dormitories. They were separate from us, sitting on chairs. It seemed like there were 100 adults and 50 or 60 of us kids. And then I saw one girl standing by herself. One of the men came and announced to us that she had tried to run away and that they had found her. They had also called her father. He came running out and screamed at her, "How dare you try to run away? Tonight I'm ashamed that you're my daughter." They specifically wanted him to paddle her in front of everyone, and he just kept hitting her and hitting her. He was hitting her so hard, he had to hold her so that she wouldn't fall forward and fall on her knees. To have your parent strike you, rather than just a demonstrator, and so public, that was just horribly humiliating. It was just heartbreaking to watch. Also, just really scary. I was probably close to nine years old at that time, but there were really small children sitting there. I remember there was a little girl that was sitting next to me and she was kind of trembling and leaning into me, because it was a really scary scene. Finally, he stopped.

Celena Wittman ([20:06](#)):

The other man who had initially made the announcement that she had tried to run away, lifted up her arm to show that a victory had been made. And everybody started to clap, not us kids but the adults. Pretty soon people were shouting and cheering, as if we were at some sporting event. He let her arm drop to her side and she just stood there. She looked really broken. Then an announcement was made that if any of us kids were thinking about running away, next time it was going to be worse.

Sari Crawford ([20:58](#)):

Violence became a part of everyday life for the kids in Synanon, along with exercise and military discipline. Julie struggled with all of it. She struggled just as much playing the Synanon game.

Julie Roberts ([21:11](#)):

Being a good game player was part of being a good Synanon person. So other than being good at your work, following the Synanon rules, being helpful to the community, you got status through the game. It was something we were taught. We learned strategy about the game, how to use strategy to help get things done. So you'd have a strategy of how you were going to put the game on so and so. "I'm going to put the game on you, because you are the worst friend I've ever had." And then everybody else says, "Yeah, you're a fucking asshole too." The people that were exceptional in playing the game, who knew how to make the game funny, who knew how to make it interesting, they knew how to make people cry, were always giving kudos.

Synanon Member in The Game ([21:59](#)):

You never fucking use your game. I mean, you're fucking bad ...

Julie Roberts ([22:00](#)):

The game was very hard for me because everyone's staring at each other. I didn't like talking in front of a group of 10 people. I frequently turned my chair around and I would just stare straight ahead. There's a picture of me turned around in a Synanon game so I'm facing a wall, and I have my hands up like I'm going to be punching. So I would get punished repeatedly for not playing the game, not speaking in a single game.

Sari Crawford ([22:29](#)):

Julie was put in the punk squad as a punishment. Her days were filled with even more intense exercise and physical labor. There was no education in the punk squad. Chuck even said ...

Chuck Dederich ([22:42](#)):

Teaching them is ridiculous. Don't teach them anything. Teaching is a privilege.

Julie Roberts ([22:50](#)):

Being in the punk squad, I had reached kind of rock bottom. Every morning I woke up and said, I want out of here.

Sari Crawford ([23:00](#)):

At midnight on her 14th birthday, Julie and two other girls ran away from Synanon.

Julie Roberts ([23:08](#)):

We ran from the [smallest 00:23:11] facility and we went by the Gambonini farm. The lights were on, the dogs were working. There was a woman who said, "Please, if you need help, come in. Please, if you need help." But we were too afraid because we had always been told that Gambonini had been known to kill people that left Synanon. We arrived in Petaluma early in the morning and walked right into the police department. We were asked what happened and they're, "Synanon." Everybody's eyes rolled up, because they'd seen a lot of Synanon people coming through. The other girls had a plan. They had someone they could call and I didn't know who to have them call. I didn't see that I had help from anyone. I just knew that I wanted out.

Sari Crawford ([23:57](#)):

The only person Julie could think to call was her mom. She picked Julie up at the police station and then she brought her back to Synanon. Julie was made to perform humiliating tasks like cleaning up feces in a pig pen, using a carrot and a cup. Her future in Synanon became a topic of discussion.

Julie Roberts ([24:19](#)):

Chuck said that I needed to get my ass kicked and that if I wanted to leave Synanon so bad, they should just let me leave. "Get that bitch out of here. Throw her fucking bags and her sick-ass mother too," they said. Unknown to me, my mom had been in communication with my father and my father had agreed to take me. My mother was there with me on the side of the road at an intersection where we were going

to meet up with my father. I felt that my mom had lost her chance to ever be my mother again. So the last thing that was done, as I had packed my items into the suitcase, is that I was told to sit on a chair. A woman came over and shaved my head with a shaver blade, so it was down to the skin. I left officially on January 29th, 1976.

Buddy Jones ([25:36](#)):

I was a contractor for 13 years after I left Synanon and I started just messing with wood, sanding and scraping it. It was usually some old abandoned piece of wood that I just picked up and started carving on, and somehow I began to discover that even the worst pieces of wood still had a soul.

Sari Crawford ([26:06](#)):

This is Buddy Jones from the punk squad.

Buddy Jones ([26:10](#)):

Can this camera move? Can you see behind me? That's the last two weeks of work. This was a bush and I scraped all the bark off of it, and now look. There's a little philosophy behind it, which is, perfection is not my goal. I just accept my wood the way it is, and when I say I'm finished, it's finished. So the wood is important to me. Maybe the real reason that it's important is, it doesn't talk back.

Sari Crawford ([26:45](#)):

If you ask Buddy, he'll tell you that his story begins in Riverside, California. But we're going to fast forward to the 1960s when Buddy was playing football for San Diego State University on a team full of future NFL legends.

Buddy Jones ([27:00](#)):

The head coach is Don Coryell and the defensive coach was John Madden. The defensive captain was Joe Gibbs and I was the defensive co-captain. One day during a drill Madden saw me hitting. I would hit so hard that Madden pulled me to the side and said, "Jones, you got to stop hurting people." I said, "Coach, this is football." He said, "I'm talking about your teammates." I wanted to hit anybody because by that time of my evolution, I was a black man with a chip on his shoulder.

Sari Crawford ([27:50](#)):

Racial tensions in America had reached a boiling point and San Diego was a very segregated city.

Buddy Jones ([27:58](#)):

It was the first time in my life that someone said, "Why don't you go to the nigger side of town?" And that didn't happen just once. It happened about three or four times, and it became apparent that I wasn't going to be able to find a house anywhere near the campus.

Sari Crawford ([28:17](#)):

Buddy heard about a place called Synanon that had recently opened up in San Diego. He heard that it was all about community and equality.

Buddy Jones ([28:26](#)):

One Saturday, my wife and I went to their Saturday night open house. The whole place was totally integrated. Here's this new organization doing fantastic social things, and the top of it is black and white. I wanted to be a part of that. When you find two people that had the charisma of both Chuck and Betty, you had to be in awe. At a certain point, I was invited to move in and that was 1969. I went directly to work for the school when I moved into Synanon. That was my first job.

Sari Crawford ([29:10](#)):

Buddy teamed up with another newcomer in the school, Rod Mullen. Rod would become the director of the entire program, including the punk squad.

Rod Mullen ([29:21](#)):

There were good things about the school and there were bad things about the school. But nonetheless, there was a team of us that were pretty committed to that, and we did the best we could.

Sari Crawford ([29:35](#)):

Rod's path to Synanon began at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was a student activist during the height of the anti-war and free speech movements. But he noticed that many of his peers left the demonstrations and went home to their comfortable lives when the school year ended. He didn't think that activism should be part-time.

Rod Mullen ([29:56](#)):

If you really want to change things in society, the protests may be part of that, but then you have to build something that addresses the issues and comes up with solutions.

Sari Crawford ([30:08](#)):

After graduating Rod moved to Oakland. He studied photography and documented the impact of systemic racism in the community. He also found Synanon's facility in Oakland.

Rod Mullen ([30:20](#)):

I'm meeting the same people that are in West Oakland. A lot of African American people, poor, with addiction problems. I'm seeing, the neighborhood itself has so many negative components that as people start getting positive, that just drags them back down again. There's this undertow. And what I see in Synanon is, I see the same people and they're positive and they're working together and there's racial integration and even class integration. This is something I want to be part of. I got to try something different. We can't just go on living with the goal in life being a white picket fence and a job, with mom at home raising the kids. The saddest aspect of someone's life is if there's no meaning. I think Synanon was great at giving people a real sense of meaning. I said, "I don't want to run around taking other people's pictures. I actually want to be in the picture."

Sari Crawford ([31:34](#)):

Once Rod arrived at Synanon, he saw the school as a place he could make a difference.

Rod Mullen ([31:39](#)):

The school was really under-resourced, so there were a few adults. Newcomers would get assigned to come over and work with the kids, and they were no bueno. They were not mature enough themselves

to be in those positions but we didn't have anybody else, so we had to make do with what we had. And here comes this guy who is a mature adult. Buddy came into Synanon, another guy, my age. I latched onto Buddy like, my god, you're here. And here we were, with our kids in this school and we made this commitment, and we had a hell of a lot of work to do and we needed each other. I mean, we just kind of latched onto each other.

Buddy Jones ([32:31](#)):

When we put the school together, it was predominantly female demonstrators, but some of the younger boys were beginning to test their testosterone. They were pushing back on the women. And that was one wise decision Chuck made, which is, "Let's have these guys push back on some real men." And that's when we started basic training. Most of the time, the drill sergeant, his bark is bigger than his bite. But in your mind, you don't want to cross the drill sergeant. You just don't want to do that. I don't even know what the issue was, but kids did something in a dormitory. So I went in the building and I just picked a kid. I says, "Come outside with me." I said, "Do you want me to mess you up?" "Oh, no. Oh no, no." He knew. I said, "I'm going to pound on this building and every time I pound on it, I want you to scream like a banshee [hin 00:33:38]. So I would bang on this building and looked like I was just really ... I didn't do anything to him. I just made him scream. He went back in and he went along with the act. He says, "Okay. Okay. Okay." So I went back and I said, "Anybody else want some of this?" And they all were at attention.

Buddy Jones ([34:08](#)):

All that took was just the idea of it. We call it the father principle. When I was young, I got in trouble and my father was going to give me a whooping and he started to do it. He said to me, "You're not going to cry, are you son?" I said, "No, sir." I didn't back off or I didn't cry. He says, "Good," and a smile came to his face. He said, "I'm very proud of you." He said, "But do that again, I'm going to treat you like a man." I didn't want that to happen so that was the end of getting in trouble. But in Synanon, because it was such a safe community, we didn't have that kind of principle. There were certain realities our kids didn't know. They didn't know what it would be like to confront a guy like me on the street and tell me, go fuck yourself. They didn't know what kind of response they would get. Once they ran up against it, they understood, oh, this is what happens. The first group of kids that came to us really were out of control. Those guys knew that I was pretty tough. Remember Mr. T? I pity the man who tried to cross Buddy. The punk squad was some young guys who had just got out of hand, didn't listen to anybody.

Buddy Jones ([35:35](#)):

And then there's a group of kids who came from the county juvenile hall. They were kids that the county juvenile hall couldn't handle and put in our possession. To be honest, that's where I was needed. When you have kids that have gone that far, just being tough is not enough. It just wasn't enough. So when they brought those kids in, we had to turn things up a notch. So not only did they get basic training, they got behavioral training

Rod Mullen ([36:09](#)):

I amongst others said, "Look, we can't handle these kids. We can't." Chuck said, "Here we are with the mighty Synanon, we've dealt with all kinds of criminals and so forth and so on. What? We can't handle a few teenagers?" I said, "If we throw them out on the street, what's going to happen to them?" "Well, that's a dilemma. So let's do something. If you have to use corporal punishment to get their attention, if that's the only thing that they understand, then let's do that." Chuck was a good salesman.

Sari Crawford ([36:47](#)):

Chuck realized these kids were different from the others and they required a different approach. So he eliminated one of his two original rules of no drinking and no violence. He said ...

Chuck Dederich ([37:00](#)):

We built our punk squad on the position of violence. Does everyone realize that? By the simple device of saying, the hell with a nonviolent approach, every time a kid sasses you, knock him on his ass.

Geoff Becker ([37:14](#)):

You punched a kid in the chest. That was the corporal punishment. You didn't strike their face. You didn't start beating them up. You didn't kick them. All you did was hit them and strike them in the chest, and that usually would knock a kid down. I didn't like doing that. I did it, but it wasn't me. Those were always the worst days of my life because I just wasn't comfortable with it.

Sari Crawford ([37:42](#)):

This is Geoff Becker. When he was a newcomer, he was assigned to work in the punk squad.

Geoff Becker ([37:48](#)):

I worked for Rod at that time. I wasn't a fan. I don't want to say bad things, but I was not a fan. I have to say, honestly, I don't think I was qualified to be in that position. I had been shooting heroin two years earlier. I didn't have training working with kids, so I don't think I was qualified to put my hands on a kid. They just kind of plopped me in there. And with the punk squad, you basically always had to be angry. They were kids that nobody else wanted anymore. They basically got thrown out of everywhere else. These were kids whose parents literally dropped them off and drove away. So they were monsters. They were horrible. You'd have this little cute kid and then you'd walk past the housing, the tent, and you'd hear them and you'd realize, this kid is Satan.

Buddy Jones ([38:45](#)):

Corporal punishment was a reaction to a violation. It's like when you see a mother bear with her cubs and she might keep them out of danger by knocking them over. There's usually a reason for that kind of activity. I was involved in that and I think that on some level Chuck knew the difference with Rod and myself of understanding the difference between abusing a child and corporal punishment.

Chuck Dederich ([39:24](#)):

When kids get out of line, they're knocked on their asses. That treatment turns them into woolly lams in about a week.

Buddy Jones ([39:33](#)):

I practiced judo, boxing, collegiate wrestling, football and street fighting. Okay? I could have hurt some of those kids. I mean, really hurt some of those kids. That never happened. That just never happened. Now, it may have felt like it, but it didn't. That didn't happen. It scared the shit out of them. But in terms of the kids, I think that that conversation of the difference between abuse and corporal punishment got lost somewhere. No, no, you have to understand this, my friend. We had crazy people in Synanon. We had people who had mental problems, serious mental problems. And we had no filter in the system to say who was and wasn't qualified to work with the kids. If you were going to open up a nursery school

these days, you wouldn't go down to Patton State Hospital and interview the patients. Some of those people worked out their own situations, working with the kids. I think they abused some of the kids.

Sari Crawford ([40:46](#)):

Buddy Jones and Rod Mullen say they were in over their heads with the punk squad. They were just following Chuck's rules. And they may not have realized it at the time, but a massive change had taken place in Synanon.

Rod Mullen ([41:00](#)):

That opened the door. You got people involved in the school who just were being violent to all the kids. You make that switch to, well, in this case we can be violent to save these kids from a terrible fate, but then how do you get the genie back in the box? So that in some ways was the first crack in that position of nonviolence. And of course, it just went totally out of control.

Reporter ([41:38](#)):

On March 3rd, the Marin County grand jury released a report criticizing Synanon for actions that have left people worried and uneasy. Julie Moncharsh, 16, who ran away from Synanon two years ago, says she was punched and beaten and saw many others beaten.

Julie Roberts ([41:56](#)):

One boy was physically beaten because he did not do the 20 pushups that he was assigned. He was beaten. He was hit in the head and then stomped in the stomach.

Reporter ([42:07](#)):

Synanon says the grand jury statements and Ms. Moncharsh's allegations about child abuse are lies. It also denies that children ...

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

Julie Moncharsh was one of the first people to speak publicly about abuse in Synanon. Alvin Gambonini spoke up too, and people were starting to listen and they were starting to pay attention to what else was happening in Synanon.

Reporter ([42:28](#)):

The grand jury expressed concern about Synanon's recent large weapons purchase from this gun shop in San Francisco.

Rod Mullen ([42:37](#)):

As Synanon began to change from a moral society to what it became, it just felt terrible that that initial situation with the kids was an inflection point. But if I had said, "Fuck you, I'm not going to do it, do I think that Synanon would have not become violent?" No, that was in the cards and that was where it was going and that's where Chuck was going. There was going to be a breaking point and that just happened to be it. But then it just went fucking crazy.

Sari Crawford ([43:28](#)):

Next time on the Sunshine Place ...

Mike Gimbel ([43:31](#)):

Chuck was talking about changes and he really had this thing about the children. So Chuck would get on his high horse and start talking about, "Why do we have to have kids anyway?"

Sari Crawford ([43:45](#)):

Chuck decides that there will be no more children born into Synanon.

Cordelia Becker ([43:48](#)):

I felt like I was walking around Synanon with a cigarette or a bottle of booze. I was a walking enemy of the state because I had this newborn baby.

Sari Crawford ([44:00](#)):

He goes to extreme measures to make sure of it.

Mike Gimbel ([44:03](#)):

He started talking about, "Every male in Synanon should get a vasectomy and any woman who's pregnant will have an abortion," and my wife told me she was pregnant.

Sari Crawford ([44:19](#)):

Thank you for listening to the Sunshine Place, a creation and presentation of C13Originals, 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 C13Originals. 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 Sandtroen; Sean Cherry; Lizzy Roberti; and Danny Kutrick of Cadence13. Cadence13 is an Audacy company.