

Announcer ([00:09](#)):

C13 Originals.

Magic Lady (song) ([00:24](#)):

(singing)

Sari Crawford ([00:29](#)):

The song you're hearing is called Magic Lady. It's a tribute to Chuck's wife, Betty Dederich. Here's Elena Broslovsky. You heard in the last episode describing motherhood in the hatchery.

Elena Broslovsky ([00:44](#)):

Betty had just found out she had a life threatening serious cancer. Some people put together this beautiful montage, pictures of her and video clips about her life that we watched and she cried, as did all of us. And Chuck called a game on her and said, "These people work so hard to make this for you. You're so ungracious. Can't you just stop feeling sorry for yourself for a minute?" Everybody was like, "Oh, how can he play the game with Betty?" And she perked up after that and started laughing again and had energy. It was like watering a flower.

Elena Broslovsky ([01:32](#)):

He represented the business and she represented the spiritual, the beautiful, the loving, the embracing. You also saw the way they work together, almost like a dance. He was the horse and she was the bird. That's what they called each other. He was like a horse clumping through the environment. Stay out of his way, but then be sure to follow him because wherever he's going, something very interesting is going to happen. And with her, it was more grace. And as she got sicker, he set up a room for her and there was a stained glass piece that somebody had made that hung in the room. And it had a large horse and a bird encircled together. It said, "the horse loves the bird".

Elena Broslovsky ([02:39](#)):

The room that was made up for her had these beautiful white sheets with yellow flowers on them. Her bed was on a platform. And then these comfortable chairs so people could sit in the room. And various people would come and kneel by her bedside, even though at this point her breathing was labored and maybe she could mutter a few words. I would just go when I could and just sit there and be with her. I had never watched someone that loved another person take care of them as they were losing them. And I watched him sit by her bedside, he had a wash cloth and some water and he would wipe her face and give her water to sip. And at this point, her breathing was like a rasping, you could just hear.

Elena Broslovsky ([03:49](#)):

I don't think she was capable of saying much at all. And he was sitting by her side saying, "It's all right to let go. It's going to be beautiful." Somehow a bird got in the room and I'd never seen a bird in there before. I don't know how it got in there. And it started fluttering around the room, and Chuck, who had been so quiet and loving to Betty, turned and looked at us like we were idiots and said, "Open the door and let that thing out."

Magic Lady (song) ([04:51](#)):

(singing)

Sari Crawford ([04:57](#)):

In April of 1977, Betty Dederich passed away.

Magic Lady (song) ([05:02](#)):

(singing)

Elena Broslovsky ([05:06](#)):

She had died at 3:00 AM. Her last words were, "Take care of each other."

Sari Crawford ([05:26](#)):

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

Lena Lindsay ([05:41](#)):

Betty, she and I were partners and we were sisters, and I loved her from the time she walked in until I walked out.

Sari Crawford ([05:51](#)):

This is Lena Lindsay, 95 years old, one of the original members of Synanon.

Bill Goodson ([05:57](#)):

Can you see that?

Sari Crawford ([05:59](#)):

And that's Lena son, Bill Goodson-

Bill Goodson ([06:01](#)):

We grew up.

Sari Crawford ([06:02](#)):

One of the first kids in Synanon. They're looking at a photograph of Lena and Betty from the early 1960s.

Bill Goodson ([06:10](#)):

That's them in the water.

Lena Lindsay ([06:11](#)):

That's me and Betty.

Bill Goodson ([06:13](#)):

Is that in front of the ...

Lena Lindsay ([06:15](#)):

Yeah, that's in front of the armory.

Sari Crawford ([06:18](#)):

In the photo, they're both in shorts and t-shirts, up to their ankles in the Pacific Ocean with big smiles on their faces.

Lena Lindsay ([06:25](#)):

Me and my girl. She was still that same Betty. I didn't even know that she was sick. I didn't even know that she had cancer or anything. She never let me know.

Sari Crawford ([06:38](#)):

Lena didn't know that Betty was dying because Lena had left Synanon and her kids had left before she did.

Lena Lindsay ([06:46](#)):

They used to come and have dinner with me every once in a while and Betty told me that the kids couldn't come back to the club anymore. She and Chuck both knew that I wasn't going to go for that.

Bill Goodson ([07:05](#)):

And she said to my mom, basically, "For the betterment of the community, I don't think it's a good idea that you continue to see your children now that they're outside of Synanon." What happened soon after is my mother left Synanon. After almost 20 years of being in Synanon, the prospect of leaving would have been daunting to say the least. But I know that that conversation with Betty sealed the deal, and I know in my heart that Betty did that on purpose and made sure that my mother left before things got weird.

Bill Goodson ([07:56](#)):

Things were beginning to change in Synanon and not for the better, and particularly not for the old timers, the original dope fiends that were still in Synanon, and my mother was one of those people.

Sari Crawford ([08:16](#)):

Old timer dope fiends like Lena were in leadership positions in Synanon and they had a lot of status because of their longevity. Rehab was still Synanon's purpose on paper, but Chuck was more interested in attracting lifestylers into the community.

Lena Lindsay ([08:33](#)):

Chuck was all about money and they used to move in and give up all that stuff. And we as dope fiends used to laugh at them because we used to say a lot of them we're crazier than the dope fiends were. Because us dope fiends, we knew that we were nuts, but they thought they were somewhere close to their right minds and they were out of their birds. Well, he talked to us drug addicts like we were animals, like we had done nothing. Somewhere along the line, out of all of us that helped Chuck build the place, he started to cut us loose, cut us loose for the people with the money.

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

Chuck said that dope fiends like Lena came into Synanon with nine fingers. And so he wanted to surround himself with people who had all 10 fingers. People like Ron Cook, the accountant who became president of Synanon.

Ron Cook ([09:43](#)):

He would say, "Hey, don't forget you're a nine-fingered person." It would be a way of describing somebody who came in and who'd had a drug habit, who'd been in jail, who had all these problems. You have that limitation in life, don't forget it. Compare that to somebody who has 10 fingers, who went to college, got a degree, became a CPA. It didn't mean that I'm a better human being. And a lot of the people who really prided themselves on being a dope fiend rehab joint, they were no longer number one in the community, and they felt resentment and they felt losses. It was becoming a different organization. It's not the same business. It moved to the next level.

Sari Crawford ([10:36](#)):

Chuck made his opinions about dope fiends known to the whole Synanon community in a taped game that was later called The Wrath of God.

Charles Dederich ([10:45](#)):

I created Synanon. I took you out of the gutter and gave you a new life. You will either work with me or I'll get rid of you one by one and start all over again, but with squares who won't drag their feet and subvert my efforts. Synanon is changing. There is a place for you if you want it. If you don't, get out.

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

Here's Andre James, who you heard in the last episode. He was one of the young men who got a vasectomy.

Andre James ([11:18](#)):

We're not really practicing a form of democracy and Derick never said it was. He said, "This is a dictatorship and I'm doing an experiment in alternative living. And if you don't like it, you can leave."

Sari Crawford ([11:31](#)):

Andre came to Synanon as a teenager from San Francisco. And when he got there, he was enrolled in a program that Chuck called The Academy, which was kind of like a college for promising young people in the community.

Andre James ([11:43](#)):

He said, "We're going to give you a real education, a revolutionary education." They wanted us to help build the organization. The organization, I think, was getting bigger than he could control, because now you had 2000 people living in five different places across the country. How do you maintain that culture?

Sari Crawford ([12:08](#)):

Chuck needed people he could trust, who wouldn't challenge his ideas, who could take the mantle from him if he ever decided to give it up.

Andre James ([12:18](#)):

We became megaphones for Dederich's ideas, let's put it that way, to basically spread the word with our Red Books, if you will. Always use the image of the red book from Communist China. Veteran old timers, they all had their own following within Synanon. I saw a jealousy he had with them. I think Dederich just decided that he needed to replace them with the young new lions from The Academy.

Margo McCartney ([12:46](#)):

Chuck started calling people like that dinosaurs. "I don't want a bunch of old dope fiends messing this up for me. And he worked to drive these people out and he used The Academy kids to kind of spearhead it.

Sari Crawford ([13:04](#)):

This is Cory Becker, who spoke last episode about how Chuck's childlessness policy affected her relationship with her newborn daughter. Before she was a mother, she was a member of The Academy.

Cory Becker ([13:17](#)):

It was like the Red Guard, Chairman Mao's Red Guard. Just taking all these young people and sending them out to put the professors and the businessmen in reeducation camps. It was the same kind of thing and he would tell us that we were the flies. He said, "You can't go toe to toe in the game with these old timers, but you can be like a fly just annoying the fuck out of them." Pretty soon, there's so many of the flies, you can't swat them all away.

Andre James ([13:54](#)):

I was really a gung-ho. If someone had done something, made a mistake, I was the first Red Book carrier to take him into a game and expose it. We were always airing out things that could create corruption, whereas the veterans, they saw the wisdom in having confidences and not making everything a crime. And so the veterans were corrupt, someone holding us back from our true evolution into a new kind of community. A lot of what made Synanon work in the beginning had to do with creating an environment where people felt they could tell each other the truth because they knew that they were going to make mistakes. They knew they were going to break the rules and they knew they needed to talk about it so that they didn't end up running out and OD'ing and killing themselves.

Sari Crawford ([14:49](#)):

Here's Margo McCartney who was addicted to heroin when she came to Synanon in 1963, so she was one of the old timer dope fiends. You heard her back in episode two explaining why the game was the reason that Synanon worked. Now she says the game had changed.

Margo McCartney ([15:07](#)):

It didn't seem to have much value anymore. It didn't for me, it just got kind of nuts. Somebody was challenging Chuck in a game. It was a woman and he got up and he poured a soda on her head and I thought, God damn, that's out of control. That's not Synanon. He just became very insecure and didn't want anyone to criticize him. I think Chuck was, I don't know, I just think he lost it. For years, whatever you said in a game, just stayed in a game. But then certain games became public because of The Wire. That changed a whole lot because if I'm talking to you in a room in Tomales Bay and somebody's sitting in Santa Monica and hears it, that's a message to that person in Santa Monica. That shifted the game into something else. The game became a manipulation tool.

Margo McCartney ([16:19](#)):

It was Chuck. Chuck did it. I remember Richie Gross was just kicked out of Synanon for challenging something. I think he said something about Dorothy Salon who was a wealthy woman who moved into Synanon. I was in the game and suddenly Chuck was there and he said, "Out. Just get out." And he kicked them out and he put them off the property and it was one of those games that was broadcast.

Margo McCartney ([16:51](#)):

It was horrible. I didn't want to get thrown out. Get thrown out, you're on the highway, what do you do then? That may have been my demarcation from thinking the game was a safe place to speak, because it wasn't. I kept my mouth shut. I said, "Okay, I'm getting this message. Keep your mouth shut."

Celena Wittman ([17:25](#)):

We had a demonstrator and she made an announcement to our classroom that something really wonderful had happened.

Sari Crawford ([17:36](#)):

This is Celena Wittman, who you've heard throughout the series talking about life as a child in Synanon.

Celena Wittman ([17:42](#)):

She said that she had been chosen to go on a date with Chuck. I remember thinking, what, because Chuck looked like he could maybe be her grandfather. Why was our young school teacher going out with him? And she said, "Well, I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

Sari Crawford ([18:06](#)):

Celena's demonstrator was named Jenny. She was 31. Chuck was 64. After Betty died, Chuck made it known to the community that he was seeking a new partner.

Charles Dederich ([18:20](#)):

I put out word that my milk white body with all of its curtains was for sale. I looked over the list. Jenny was the only one I had much contact with. I ordered her up on a silver platter. She came down and we began to get acquainted. We talked and spered and ended up going to bed together.

Sari Crawford ([18:44](#)):

Chuck and Jenny tied the knot. It was his fourth marriage. Meanwhile, my dad was on his third marriage to Miriam Bourdette. They had two children together, my sisters Rebecca and Naomi. And since Chuck was big daddy to Miriam, they were kind of like his grandkids. Here's Miriam.

Miriam Bourdette ([19:08](#)):

When he saw the picture of me giving birth to Rebecca, which Bill took close up pictures, he remarked, "Look how beautiful she looks. She looks so happy." And he was very tender about that and he patted her on the head and said, "Glad you're here." I mean, he didn't pick her up and hold her and rock her or anything, Betty did that, but he definitely expressed his pleasure at my pleasure. He wasn't a great father. I felt he was a great father to me, a second father. It's very complicated.

Sari Crawford ([20:00](#)):

Chuck's ideas about parenting and relationships and many parts of his core philosophy had been with him from a young age. The quotes you're about to hear are Chuck's from the story of Synanon by Daniel Castrell, published in 1963. Chuck was born in 1917 in Toledo, Ohio. Four years later, his father was taken from him.

Charles Dederich ([20:26](#)):

My father was an alcoholic. He was killed in an automobile accident. There was another woman in the car at the time.

Sari Crawford ([20:38](#)):

Chuck was the oldest of three boys, and his mother worked to make ends meet. He was forced into the father role at such a young age. He struggled and when he was eight years old, one of his brothers died from the flu. Chuck never got over the loss or the guilt. He and his mom leaned on each other.

Charles Dederich ([21:02](#)):

My mother used to sleep or read and my bed until I came home. We talked until one or two in the morning.

Sari Crawford ([21:11](#)):

When he was 12 years old. His mother remarried.

Charles Dederich ([21:15](#)):

It didn't take six weeks after their wedding, before we were squaring off against each other. He had stolen my girl and I had to do something important to get my girl back.

Sari Crawford ([21:31](#)):

Chuck began drinking as a teenager and he continued to fight with his stepfather until he enrolled at the University of Notre Dame. He found a father figure in a priest at school.

Charles Dederich ([21:44](#)):

He was a liberal, literary, and philosophic. He was the proctor on the floor I lived on so I could spend many hours with him. I think much of my basic education took place in the long talks I had with him.

Sari Crawford ([22:02](#)):

Chuck wasn't a serious student or interested in religion and he failed out of school. When he got back home, he picked up where he left off with his stepfather.

Charles Dederich ([22:14](#)):

I rebelled against everything he was. He was proper, I became delinquent. He was a Republican and capitalistic, I became a Democrat and socialistic. He was pro-business, I was pro-labor. He was God-fearing, I became an atheist.

Sari Crawford ([22:39](#)):

Chuck got a job with Gulf Oil and in 1935 he got married and had a son. He moved his family into his childhood home along with his mother and his stepfather whose health had deteriorated.

Charles Dederich ([22:55](#)):

Then my stepfather went into an involuntal depression, which lasted five years until his death. He was forced to relinquish his patriarchal role and I assumed it.

Sari Crawford ([23:09](#)):

Chuck then moved his younger brother and his family into the home.

Charles Dederich ([23:13](#)):

I was the tribal chief and the economy of three families was established under one roof.

Sari Crawford ([23:22](#)):

But this time Chuck's own health got in the way. He developed meningitis.

Charles Dederich ([23:28](#)):

I had been more dead than alive. I was in a semi-coma and unconscious for days, and when I was finally able to get out of bed, large parts of my memory of my past life were gone. I didn't have any feelings and it was rather easy at the time for me to just let go.

Sari Crawford ([23:54](#)):

Complications for meningitis led to an operation that left his face partially paralyzed. Chuck's alcoholism kicked into full swing.

Charles Dederich ([24:04](#)):

I was drinking heavily. I realized there was something bothering me, something gnawing and eating inside of me.

Sari Crawford ([24:20](#)):

Chuck got in his car and drove west and kept going until he hit the beach.

Charles Dederich ([24:27](#)):

In 1943, when I left my family, I thought I would come to the west coast and die where there was warm sunshine.

Sari Crawford ([24:39](#)):

Chuck saw his life as a failure until that one day when he stumbled into an AA meeting and began to turn his life around. By 1958, he'd formed Synanon and became Big Daddy. He was going to try to play the father role one last time, even if he had never fully reconciled with the trauma from his past.

Charles Dederich ([25:05](#)):

I never could be a good father. I couldn't learn when I was a child to be a father to my baby brother, and I guess I gave up trying. I always had a feeling of inadequacy.

Sari Crawford ([25:27](#)):

Back to Mariam Bourdette. She says that before Betty's death and the childlessness edict, Chuck found out that my dad, Bill Crawford, was cheating on her.

Miriam Bourdette ([25:39](#)):

Bill copped out. He had affairs. Chuck started putting some pressure on me to leave Bill. I said, "No." He reversed course and put pressure on Bill and said, "Bill, you'll never be able to regain your manhood living with a woman you've cheated on a number of times, and so you have to leave her." And I said to Bill, "I don't want to get divorced." He said, "Nope, we're going to get divorced." And that was it. I mean, it was my husband just handed me a note. Do I want Rebecca and Naomi me to hear all of this about Bill? Yes, I do. I do. I think they know most of it.

Sari Crawford ([26:46](#)):

Miriam and my father got divorced, but my father rebounded. He noticed a woman named Sylvia Sternberg.

Sylvia Sternberg ([26:55](#)):

He was always nice to me, but he was nice to everybody.

Sari Crawford ([27:00](#)):

You heard Sylvia in an earlier episode describing how her connection to Synanon was cemented by her experience on the trip.

Sylvia Sternberg ([27:07](#)):

One day there was a daffodil by my bed on my end table with a note that said, "Guess who?"

Sari Crawford ([27:17](#)):

My father and Sylvia began dating.

Sylvia Sternberg ([27:22](#)):

The first time that we were going to have sex, he wanted to use his room, but that was frowned upon. And me being a goody two shoes, I said, "No, I signed us up for the executive guest rooms." The fancy ones, right? So if you were in a relationship, you could reserve a guest room so you could have sex. Pretty crowded place. It was booked up a lot. I had been with Bill for six months. All of a sudden Chuck goes, "If you are with somebody six months, you either get married or you break up. We want people committed to each other." Well, Bill and I were not interested in separating. So he said, "Okay, let's get married. What the hell?" 75 other couples did what we did.

Sari Crawford ([28:27](#)):

Bill and Sylvia, along with all those other couples, were married in a huge group wedding. It was Sylvia's first marriage and my father's fourth.

Sylvia Sternberg ([28:39](#)):

And 75 couples are dressed up as if they are in 1600s with these weird hats because women then showed just the foreheads and the men had these pantaloon pants on. And 75 couples walked around this horse rink. Rebecca and Naomi, where our flower girls. You kissed and then it was like a party. It was beautiful.

Sari Crawford ([29:13](#)):

Sylvia Sternberg was now Sylvia Crawford, which makes her my mom. My mother was 28 years old when she married my father, the same age I am now. I never knew all the details about my parents' love story or what it was like being married in Synanon, especially after Betty died. Chuck remarried, but he began thinking a lot about the social constructs of traditional marriage. Here's Mike Gimbel who worked for the Board of Directors.

Bill Gimbel ([29:51](#)):

He got on his high horse about relationships, about if you can do certain things, you can love anybody.

Sari Crawford ([30:03](#)):

First it was addiction, then it was communal living, then education, parenting, and children. Chuck's next big experiment was going to be love. Here's Elena Broslovsky.

Elena Broslovsky ([30:21](#)):

We began talking about the divorce rate in our country. Why is it that we do not move from a platform of love into a new relationship? Why is the cultural assumption that when you get divorced you're going to move from a platform of hate? Before Betty died, she had been talking about this and she came up with this beautiful separation ceremony. A group of your closest friends would come together. Each of the couple would talk about how much they loved the person, why they had come together, why they wanted to move from a single love relationship to friendship. And then each couple would exchange a gift and would then be welcomed back into the community.

Elena Broslovsky ([31:21](#)):

They said that after the separation ceremony, you could go back with your mate or separate if you wanted to. So I said, "Well, let's just do the separation ceremony. It's no big deal." You didn't have to participate, but as an elder, we were supposed to demonstrate our commitment to Synanon and its ideas. So the next day after the separation ceremony, I went back with Bill not even thinking twice about it. All of a sudden there's this thing on The Wire and people talking about, "No, no, no, no. You can't go back with your husband. You have to find somebody else."

Bill Gimbel ([32:05](#)):

Literally over the loud speakers, Chuck said, "All marriages, all relationships are over. Everyone is to find a new partner." He's having everybody change partners.

Sylvia Sternberg ([32:26](#)):

Chuck said, we're doing it. That's it. Boom. Everybody was dismantled. If you were in a relationship, if you were married, you were no longer. It was dissolved, it was gone. Here's the philosophy. Who is the person that you're closest to? Your mate. Now, if you separate from that person and you connect with another person, now three people are connected. And if you do it again, all of a sudden, all the people

that were connected to one person, were now connected to several people in a very deep, meaningful way. And everybody's trying to hook me up. People were matching you. You should be with him and he should be with you, and this one should be real.

Sari Crawford ([33:19](#)):

Miriam was with Rod Mullen, the director of the school and the Punk Squad, but she changed partners too.

Miriam Bourdette ([33:27](#)):

We were together until Changing Partners. And then he got with Naya, I got with Phil. Naya was married to Richie Gross who got with Jan Schwartz, who was married to Dave Schwartz, who got with Terry, who was with Phil, who is now with me. So it was eight people who were completely intertwined. Here's the kicker, you were supposed to consummate this relationship. I ended up being matched with a guy who was in love with his wife and wanted to be with his wife, and we spent the night crying, literally both of us crying. The next day, the game, and we lied. We said we had sex, but we didn't. I didn't want the pressure.

Sari Crawford ([34:27](#)):

Here's Margo McCartney.

Margo McCartney ([34:30](#)):

I didn't like it at all. I felt like a pawn in a chess match. My husband, he came home from a trip to see Chuck and announced that he was going to be going with Chuck's secretary, whom he's still married to, so I guess it was a good relationship for them. Some people, it was a gift. They had been unhappy in their marriages. And then it got nasty. People said things to their mates that were just disgusting. "I'm so happy now. You were so this. You were so bad." Not just everyday things, but sexually and bodily. And oh my God, how does a place tell you who to love?

Charles Dederich ([35:27](#)):

I thought, wouldn't it be funny to perform some kind of emotional surgery on people who were getting along pretty well?

Andre James ([35:37](#)):

I changed partners with my wife, who I was still really in love with thinking, okay, this is what it's going to take to build the organization and for us to show true loyalty.

Sari Crawford ([35:50](#)):

Andre James was one of the promising young up and comers from The Academy. He was close enough to Chuck to notice a different motivation.

Andre James ([36:00](#)):

Chuck found himself in games crying because he lost his wife. He was totally human, and it was all about, I'm in pain, I have to do it, so you guys have to do it. I think that he wanted us all to be at the same level of emotional stress. He was that vain and that manipulative of a person.

Sari Crawford ([36:26](#)):

By the end of the year, roughly 300 couples had changed partners. Now you can start to understand how interconnected people in Synanon are. When you add kids and grandkids into it, it seems like we're all related.

Andre James ([36:47](#)):

You're marrying the organization, you're making Synanon more important than your primary relationship, and that's what Dederich was all about at that point. Loyalty. Loyalty to the organization first. If I get them to do this, then I can get them to do anything.

News Reporter ([37:20](#)):

During the past three years, the number of violent incidents involving outsiders who crossed Synanon's path has increased sharply. Richard Marino and Calvin Smith say they were run off this road by Synanon trucks. Synanon accused them of attempting to run down some Synanon bicyclists.

Sari Crawford ([37:40](#)):

Wherever Synanon went, there was always conflict with the surrounding community. In Santa Monica, it mostly took place in community meetings and courtrooms. But as Chuck moved his core group away from cities and into remote locations, those confrontations were becoming more hands on and violent. It started with the attack on the Gambonini's, the family of ranchers who helped runaways from the Punk Squad, but incidents like that were becoming more frequent.

News Reporter ([38:10](#)):

Then Marino and Smith say they were handcuffed and beaten and their heads were shaved. Both men are suing Synanon.

Former Synanon Member ([38:17](#)):

Hell, I thought they was, for real, they was going to kill us. I didn't know up those hills [inaudible 00:38:22] they was going to throw us in our truck and over the bluff we was going to go, I figured. The one man came up there and told us, we ought to take them both out and shoot them. That's his exact words.

Sari Crawford ([38:33](#)):

Margo McCartney.

Margo McCartney ([38:35](#)):

Whether somebody actually tried to run them off the road or somebody lost their attention when they were driving, I don't know. But when Chuck heard about it, he started sending posses of people out and they brought the guys back. I saw them sitting at the ranch getting their head shaved, and I thought, God, that is just not right. That's how it started and it went all over. It went over to Santa Monica, it went to wherever we had facilities.

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

Chuck was beginning to trust less people inside Synanon, and he didn't trust anybody on the outside. More than that, those people were a threat to him and a Synanon, and they should be treated accordingly.

News Reporter ([39:25](#)):

Robert Graham, a former drug addict who was helped by Synanon years ago, says he had a similar experience. Graham says, Chuck Dederich himself threatened him.

Robert Graham ([39:35](#)):

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."

Sari Crawford ([39:45](#)):

Robert Graham was the worst thing you could be in Synanon. He was a splitee, an outsider who was once an insider. He had fled from the community, but then he wanted to return, and when he came back on the property he was assaulted. Some members say that they weren't aware that this kind of thing was happening, but my dad definitely knew what was going on. One of his jobs was to write something called the Family Report at the end of every year, which documented all the major events in the community. And every year, violent incidents took up more space in the report. I'm not trying to say my father was a saint in any sense, but he was becoming deeply concerned by it. But Chuck, he loved my dad's reports. Here's my mom, Sylvia.

Sylvia Sternberg ([40:41](#)):

Chuck calls him on The Wire and says, "Bill, I want you to come to the home place. I want you to be the Synanon archivist. You're going to be the historian for Synanon." It's like being invited to the castle, being in the royalty.

Sari Crawford ([41:01](#)):

My father had different ideas though. The growing violence was troubling to him, but more than that, he and my mom were each matched with someone else after Chuck's changing partners edict, and he'd been moved to the Santa Monica facility. So he decided that he was going to turn down Chuck's offer and he was going to defy his policy by getting back together with my mom. He knew that would make them pariahs and that their only real option was to leave Synanon, to run away. Here's my mom reading a letter from my dad.

Sylvia Sternberg ([41:43](#)):

"Dear Sylvia, I feel much relieved now that I finally really made a decision. I know those that are happily pushing through with their new relationships will probably hate us. I wish there were some way to do things "right" in Synanon." He has right in quotes. "I love you. I'll court you all over again. Love, love, love, Bill." That's it.

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

My parents met in Santa Monica to gather some belongings.

Sylvia Sternberg ([42:19](#)):

As we were about to get out of there. I said, "Bill, Chuck's always saying, you dope fiends, you ungrateful. Don't you think you should call and tell him you're leaving and say goodbye." He says, "Yeah, I guess you're right." So he calls. Bill says, "Chuck, I'm leaving." And he says, "So long, kid", in a really nasty way. So we start to walk out the door and we're stopped. A phone call was made, Chuck told Santa Monica that we were leaving and that they should stop us and take anything we had on us. And they took Bill away from me. I was very nervous. One of their fold was leaving the fold. Now he's thumbing his nose at Chuck and Synanon, and this is fodder for a lot of hatred. They took me in a separate room. They strip searched me. They told me to take off all my clothes. I wanted to cooperate because I thought maybe that would help Bill. I didn't know what they were going to do to him. I thought they were going to beat the out of him, to be honest.

Sari Crawford ([43:49](#)):

They didn't hurt him, but they strip searched him too. And then they let them both go.

Sylvia Sternberg ([43:57](#)):

We walked down the stairs, we left, and we look behind and there's two Synanon guys following us. And I told Bill, I said, "These guys back there, look." We were terrified.

Sari Crawford ([44:16](#)):

My parents got into a taxi and drove to an old friend's house where they began hiding out. Now they were splitees and not just any splitees. My father had been in Synanon for almost 20 years. He was close to the top of the organization and he was the author of that report that documented the violence in Synanon. So if he decided to talk about what was happening inside the community, he'd have a lot to say.

Sylvia Sternberg ([44:46](#)):

We didn't know why those guys were following us, and I knew that this was not going to end well.

Former Synanon Member ([44:59](#)):

And then a few minutes later, Richie Gross informed the student that Phil Ritter was on the phone informing us that he was going to seek an injunction for, as he saw it, stopping Synanon from putting people in that terrible bind to be clipped or to leave.

Sari Crawford ([45:15](#)):

Phil Ritter was a splitee too. He left Synanon because he couldn't stop the mass vasectomies and abortions. When he'd gone to the local sheriff to try to get help, the sheriff laughed at him and told him he didn't have a problem with heroin addicts choosing to get vasectomies. When the sheriff called Synanon, they told him never to come back. After that, Phil got lawyers involved.

Phil Ritter ([45:42](#)):

I tried to get a court order ordering Synanon not to do the vasectomies, but by the time we got a judge that would issue an order, they had already done all of vasectomies.

Sari Crawford ([45:57](#)):

Phil's wife, Lynn, stayed in Synanon, but now she was his former wife after changing partners. Phil took further legal action and was able to get visitation rights with their daughter.

Phil Ritter ([46:12](#)):

Things were getting a little crazier in Synanon, and our daughter showed up for one of these visits, obviously not well cared for, in a different place emotionally. Lynn had a cousin who was a noted child psychologist to the movie stars and I called her and asked if she would be willing to arrange a visit with Lynn to Synanon and kind of scope out what was going on there with the kids. She came back and called me and said, "Things are just nuts. You got to get her out of there or she's going to get hurt."

Sari Crawford ([47:01](#)):

Phil got more aggressive in his pursuit of custody.

Phil Ritter ([47:05](#)):

The lawyer came up with an idea that we could just put Chuck on the stand and get him to talk under oath about what was going on in Synanon, and that that would probably convince the judge. And then I got a visitation from Rod Mullen and Leon Levy, who were both highly placed in the organization. They said, "You got to be aware that Synanon is a very different place now than it was when you left. Things are happening that could put you in harm's way if you continue to pursue this idea of putting Chuck on the stand."

Sari Crawford ([47:48](#)):

Mike Gimbel.

Mike Gimbel ([47:50](#)):

People left and they wanted their kids. Chuck, he wouldn't give them their kids. And so a bunch of lawyers started getting involved and he seemed to really hate lawyers. At the same time that was going on, the Point Reyes Light newspaper did an expose on Synanon and they got a Pulitzer Prize for it. It was the first time that I'd been there that the outside world was looking poorly on Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([48:29](#)):

It had been almost 20 years since Chuck had founded Synanon. Back then, his creation was being called The Miracle on the Beach. But after the shaved heads, the religious overtones, the runaway kids from the Punk Squad, the violence, the vasectomies and abortions, and now changing partners, Synanon was being called something else. The first sentence in a Time Magazine article from December of 1977 described Synanon like this. "A once respected drug program turns into a kooky cult."

Phil Ritter ([49:14](#)):

I think that really got to him. He just got pissed off about it. A guy like Chuck Dederich has to believe his own bullshit or he can't do what he did. He had to believe it enough to sell it on everybody. And now all of a sudden he's being questioned by people outside, because nobody inside would ever question him. And then on top of everything, Betty dies. And now here's this lonely guy who's now being attacked like he's never been before. And nothing was ever the same after that.

Sari Crawford ([50:00](#)):

Something had changed in Chuck, something drastic and he announced it to the world on national television.

Charles Dederich ([50:10](#)):

Synanon has many, many thousands of friends have been helped by Synanon. And I don't know what those people might do, and I have no way of being responsible for it. Moms could be thrown into odd places. That's too bad, that's too bad. I would certainly not institute anything like that, but I have no way of preventing it, if it would happen.

News Reporter 2 ([50:39](#)):

The people at Time Life will undoubtedly consider that a thinly veiled threat.

Charles Dederich ([50:42](#)):

See, if they consider it a thinly veiled threat, that's their problem. I think there's kind of decent of me to warn them.

Sari Crawford ([51:01](#)):

Next time on The Sunshine Place-

Ron Cook ([51:04](#)):

Chuck says, we are going to build our own security department. The head of security presented a proposal for some guns. So I said, "How many guns do you need?"

Sari Crawford ([51:14](#)):

Chuck decides he needs his own security, but as his paranoia grows, he decides he needs his own army.

Mike Gimbel ([51:22](#)):

He wanted a serious outfit, he wanted his own special forces. He wanted his own Green Berets. He developed and came up with the Imperial Marines.

Sari Crawford ([51:34](#)):

And the lines between protection and aggressions start to become blurred.

Buddy Jones ([51:38](#)):

And I said to the guy, "I'm going to take your own shotgun and shoot your fucking head off if you ever do this again." Don't mess with Synanon people, they'll come after you.

Sari Crawford ([51:53](#)):

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 Cadence 13 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

This transcript was exported on Sep 08, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

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