

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

C13 Originals.

The Wire Jingle (music) ([00:16](#)):

(singing)

Jay Butler ([00:20](#)):

I'm 12 or 13, and I'm working at The Wire with Dan Sorkin, this guy who was a big radio personality in Chicago, who was best friends with Bob Newhart and all this stuff. But he lived in Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([00:34](#)):

This is Jay Butler. The Wire was Synanon's internal broadcasting system. Most of the time, there was a Synanon game on The Wire or a speech Chuck made. But other times, it was just like a regular radio station with music and shows, like the one Jay worked on. My dad had a show too. He called himself Sergeant Radio, and he used it to flirt with my mom. But Chuck also used The Wire to send messages to the community whenever he decided to.

Jay Butler ([01:08](#)):

Chuck could break in at any time. So, you could be doing a show, and he could break in and just start talking about whatever. And Chuck breaks in and says, "That asshole, Otis Butler, split and left us with his three fucking kids."

Sari Crawford ([01:27](#)):

Jay was one of those three kids that Chuck was yelling about. Otis Butler was his dad. He had left, Synanon, leaving Jay and his siblings behind. But he took the money that their mom had left after she died from cancer. Jay felt alone, but Chuck's wife, Betty, was there for him.

Jay Butler ([01:47](#)):

She was the mother I needed at the time. And obviously, she had a lot of juice. Chuck, she introduced me to him. At some point, he started inviting me to these luncheons once a week. It was fascinating to me. I loved it. I could listen to him talk for hours. Super intelligent and was really fascinated with human beings and the human condition and what motivates people and how to motivate people. I was obviously flattered that he would invite me to these luncheons and talk to me like I was a human being. I loved him. I thought of him as a grandfather.

Sari Crawford ([02:38](#)):

Jay became very close with the Dietrichs, especially Chuck Jr. And his wife.

Jay Butler ([02:45](#)):

She insisted that I call her "Mom" and that I call Chuck Junior "Dad." There was talk about "changing your name."

Sari Crawford ([02:58](#)):

Jay may have thought of Chuck as his grandfather. But his grandmother, his biological one, was concerned about him and his siblings.

Jay Butler ([03:08](#)):

My grandmother was exceedingly paranoid about other people taking our money. She was under the impression that the people in Synanon were trying to get their hands on our money.

Sari Crawford ([03:24](#)):

Jay's grandmother wanted to get her grandchildren out of Synanon altogether.

News Reporter ([03:28](#)):

On March 3rd, the Marin County grand jury released a report criticizing Synanon for actions that have left people worried and uneasy.

Sari Crawford ([03:37](#)):

She had been seeing stories on the news about how things in Synanon were getting strange and authoritarian. She reached out to a lawyer named Paul Morantz. Chuck hated Paul Morantz. Morantz had developed a reputation for helping people get their loved ones out of Synanon. He was also vocal in the media. Morantz came up with a plan for how to rescue the Butler kids. Jay's grandmother made arrangements for a visit at Synanon's facility in San Francisco. And Paul Morantz made arrangements with the SFPD.

Jay Butler ([04:16](#)):

Suddenly, the entire place was crawling with San Francisco Police Department people in riot gear and face shields and all this stuff, purportedly to rescue me from this cult. Brave grandmother rescues children from kooky cult. I think there was actually a headline, exactly with those words verbatim.

Sari Crawford ([04:41](#)):

Jay was removed in 1978, leaving Synanon and his attachment to the Dietrichs behind. Now, more than 40 years later, he realizes that leaving when he did was probably for the best.

Jay Butler ([04:57](#)):

Every now and again, Chuck would say something that was scary. "Anybody who's talking shit about Synanon, someone ought to go out and get them." There was this wonderful man, Phil Ritter. And I knew that Chuck had him in his crosshairs.

Sari Crawford ([05:19](#)):

Phil Ritter was the man who left Synanon to try and stop Chuck's vasectomy edict. He reported it to the police and tried to take legal action. None of it worked, and it made him an enemy.

Jay Butler ([05:35](#)):

"He's trying to take down Synanon, everything we've worked for. Blood, sweat, and tears. And this guy's trying to destroy all of that." That's one of the names that seemed to come up constantly. "Bill Ritter, Bill Ritter, Bill Ritter." I was worried that I was becoming part of a crime family.

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

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

News Reporter ([06:11](#)):

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 ([06:34](#)):

This is a recreation of Chuck, from a taped speech called Synanon's New Religious Posture. You've heard parts of it throughout this podcast. It's the moment when Chuck declared that violence was not only permissible, it was encouraged. It was core to the Synanon religion. The tape was made in 1977. That was my parents' last year in Synanon. That's when Betty died, and Chuck decided everyone should change partners. And when Time magazine called Synanon "a kooky cult," that's when the violence started getting out of control. Here's Ron Cook. He was the accountant who became President of Synanon.

Ron Cook ([07:28](#)):

The truth was there were a lot of people in Synanon, maybe a majority, who were turn-the-other-cheek kind of people. And Chuck was talking about it. He said, "The problem with Synanon is we're living here in the middle of the country. And someday, a motorcycle gang will come in here and rape the women and kill people and destroy the facilities. And everybody will just sit around and do nothing." And so, Chuck says, "Why don't we get some people trained? We're going to build our own security department."

Sari Crawford ([08:04](#)):

Buddy Jones wasn't a turn-the-other-cheek kind of person. He spoke, in an earlier episode, about going from NFL hopeful to drill sergeant in the punk squad. And he was ready and willing to defend Synanon.

Buddy Jones ([08:20](#)):

This group of guys came by one night, and about three or four of our women were just walking. And these guys pulled up in a car and started calling everything you wouldn't want your wife or your friends or your relatives called. But what could we do? So, we jump in a car, and we follow these guys all the way down the hill. They finally pull over, and we confront them. They pull shotguns on us, told us to, "Get the fuck out of here." They made a mistake. They had the shotgun out the window. And I grabbed the shotgun. 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." And he talked his buddy into putting his gun down. And we said, "Listen, don't ever come back. Don't mess with Synanon people. They'll come after you."

Sari Crawford ([09:32](#)):

Mike Gimbel, who worked for the board of directors and was responsible for taping their meetings, remembers when Chuck started becoming more vocal about security, and more militant.

Mike Gimbel ([09:48](#)):

"We don't want anybody coming on our facility, goddammit." That's what he would say. "We're just not going to let them." And at that point, he said, "I don't want anybody who comes on our property to leave unless we interrogate them."

Sari Crawford ([10:07](#)):

Donna Cardino learned this the hard way. She was a newlywed and her husband, Tom, had been a Synanon member until he split. When they got married, he wanted Donna to see the place that had saved his life.

Donna Cardino ([10:23](#)):

We were just going to drive in a little ways and turn around and leave. As soon as we entered their property, there was people behind us. And the next thing we know, two vans had pinned us in. They came around us really fast and pinned us in, so we couldn't leave. Somebody recognized him right away, pulled him in and said, "What are you doing here?" And they dragged him out of the car and took him down the road. They dragged, one on each side. They had us somewhere, but it wasn't close by, as I lost sight of him. And I didn't know what was going to happen to me.

Donna Cardino ([11:06](#)):

When they brought him back, he didn't look too good. He had a black eye, bleeding from the nose, and he couldn't walk. They were dragging him. They did a number on him. And they threw him in the car, and they said, "Don't ever come back again."

Mike Gimbel ([11:29](#)):

Chuck and the power he had over all of us was that he never had to say, "Beat that person up who comes on." He would always throw it out there. And it was up to the people to pick up his message.

Sari Crawford ([11:48](#)):

Robert Navarro spoke in an earlier episode about Synanon's attempt to get classified as a religion by the IRS. He remembers hearing Chuck on The Wire with someone from the security department.

Robert Navarro ([11:59](#)):

And he said, "Well, Chuck, I just wanted to tell you that we took care of that situation." He basically said they had beat somebody up, that they had been looking for, and that it was all taken care of. So Chuck said:

Chuck Dederich ([12:16](#)):

"It sounds to me like you've been dreaming. This is a dream, right?"

Robert Navarro ([12:24](#)):

He said, "Oh no. No, no, no. We got him Chuck. And then finally somebody picked up on the cues and said, "Oh yes. Yeah. It was a dream. It never happened."

Mike Gimbel ([12:38](#)):

Everybody wanted to make Chuck happy. And he came up with this alert system called the Hey Rube. That meant somebody was coming on our property or there was an emergency. "Hey Rube, Hey Rube." Everyone would just grab whatever they could, even in Santa Monica.

Jeff Becker ([13:03](#)):

If you came over to the Santa Monica building, then, pissing against the wall, you could very likely have the crapped out of you.

Sari Crawford ([13:11](#)):

This is Jeff Becker. You heard him, in an earlier episode, talking about the sales team and using his addiction story as part of the pitch.

Jeff Becker ([13:20](#)):

We had spots all over the property where we were assigned to do security all night. In Santa Monica, you had different color hats. And the different color hats were your level when it came to security. Newest people had yellow hats. I was a step above. I had a red hat. And you wanted a hat. You wanted a color hat. You wanted to be one of the boys. You wanted to be part of what was going on.

Mike Gimbel ([13:47](#)):

If somebody came on the property, people went after them. And if you didn't, you were humiliated, or you were looked at as disloyal or afraid or a wimp. The Synanon games were insane. And people were being challenged because maybe they didn't want to get violent. I'm sitting there going, "I don't have a choice. I'm working for the board." I was part of a Hey Rube where we put somebody in the back of a truck and took him off the grounds. And while he was in the truck, we were beating on him and stuff. I did some crazy things when I was on drugs, but nothing like this. Then Chuck started saying, "It's time to arm ourselves."

News Reporter ([14:42](#)):

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

Sari Crawford ([14:50](#)):

Ron Cook:

Ron Cook ([14:52](#)):

The head of security presented a proposal for some guns, to get people trained on guns. And I was the financial guy. So I said, "How many guns do you need?"

Sari Crawford ([15:06](#)):

Synanon purchased at least 152 firearms, as well as a stockpile of ammunition, totalling \$60,000. It was one of the largest private firearm purchases in California history.

Ron Cook ([15:21](#)):

Well, if you took the guns, divided them by the number of this sale with these, divided them by the number of roads coming in, divided them by two securities for each person, divided by the reserve officers having a few guns in their personal possession or in the chest, the numbers were okay. We probably should have bought small amounts, so it wouldn't show up like that. But we weren't trying to hide anything. We weren't building a secret army. We had a lot of people who were anti-guns that lived in Synanon. It was talked about in the board meeting. And then somebody said, "Well, maybe if the members of the board carried guns, maybe it would make everybody feel better." Well, it made them feel worse. Yours truly started packing a weapon.

Sari Crawford ([16:10](#)):

My mom remembers this.

Sylvia Crawford ([16:12](#)):

Ron Cook, he would actually wear a gun with a holster to the game. Now that's bullshit. You're supposed to be free to say anything you want to. Well, you can't say anything you want to if somebody's wearing a gun.

Mike Gimbel ([16:32](#)):

Ron Cook was walking around with this holster and his nine millimeter like he's some big shot and he's going to shoot somebody. And Ron says, "Here, this is yours." And it was a nine millimeter. And he said, "Basically, learn how to take it apart and put it together because you're going to have to clean mine too."

Mike Gimbel ([16:55](#)):

And we would have these Sunday afternoon barbecues that were called The Shoot. And people would come by and have a barbecue, and they would learn how to shoot a gun. It even got to the point where two people in Synanon who were there became county sheriffs. Real sheriffs. They had the full uniform.

Buddy Jones ([17:24](#)):

You know I was a deputy sheriff, right? Marin County needed volunteer sheriffs. I actually became an undercover agent for them and did some undercover work.

Sari Crawford ([17:40](#)):

Buddy Jones also became Chuck's personal bodyguard.

Buddy Jones ([17:44](#)):

If I was Chuck, I'd do the same thing. I'd get Buddy Jones. Because people talk a big game, but at least I had proof that I could handle myself.

Sari Crawford ([17:57](#)):

Chuck had his own security, infrastructure, protocols, and arsenal of weapons and even allies in the local law enforcement. But he still felt threatened. He told news reporters that he thought his life was in danger and that he had to be careful in ways the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King Jr. should have been more careful.

News Reporter 2 ([18:23](#)):

[inaudible 00:18:23] Synanon has been growing for several years. Dietrichs seems to have changed and changed the organization as well. Terry Drinkwater has a background report.

Sari Crawford ([18:31](#)):

Synanon was becoming a hot story again, but not in the way it was in the 1960s. More and more people were leaving. And they were talking.

News Reporter ([18:42](#)):

Synanon denies that children are being held prisoner. Although on June 2nd, San Francisco police were called in to get these children released. Synanon had refused to return them to their family.

Sari Crawford ([18:56](#)):

The dramatic rescue of the Butler kids in San Francisco, orchestrated by their grandmother with the help of the lawyer Paul Morantz, made national news.

News Reporter ([19:05](#)):

Robert Moncharsh had a similar experience.

Robert Moncharsch ([19:08](#)):

And so, I had to make an arrangement where I had to abduct her. And yes, I had to go through a lot of changes in order to get my daughter out.

Sari Crawford ([19:18](#)):

Paul Morantz also helped a man named Robert Moncharsh, in a custody battle with Synanon over one of his daughters. If the name Moncharsh sounds familiar, it's because one of Robert's other daughters, Julie, was the girl who ran away from Synanon on her 14th birthday, after being put in the punk squad. Paul Morantz helped Julie tell her story of abuse to the public. Here's Julie.

Julie Moncharsch ([19:44](#)):

A few months after I left, Paul Morantz called me. And then he asked me to come in to do a deposition. And he arranged for some interviews with ABC News and the LA Times. And then the New York Times reported on it with lots of pictures.

Sari Crawford ([20:05](#)):

Morantz was quickly becoming Synanon's most persistent antagonist. As a result of his efforts and the growing media coverage, government agencies started paying attention too.

News Reporter ([20:19](#)):

On May 23rd, California Health Department inspectors entered Synanon's premises in Marin County with a warrant to investigate reports of child abuse and conditions in the medical facilities. Chuck Dietrich talked about the California Health Department.

Chuck Dederich ([20:34](#)):

If they want to come on our property, we'll surround them, each one of them, with ten guys twice their size, within one foot of them and say, "All right, inspect, punk." Like that, would do that.

Sari Crawford ([20:48](#)):

Chuck had always warned his followers about the dangers of the outside world. But now, as he saw it, the outside world was closing in on them.

Buddy Jones ([21:04](#)):

And I think Chuck convinced people that we were going to be attack. When you're threatened, what do you do? You prepare for war.

Mike Gimbel ([21:26](#)):

Most people in Synanon were not violent and not trained or able to really protect Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([21:38](#)):

Mike Gimbel:

Mike Gimbel ([21:42](#)):

Chuck, I think he knew that from all the Hey Rubes that were going on. "Hey Rube, Hey Rube." We were just a bunch of crazy people, shaving heads of people that came on our property and pushing them around. He wanted a serious outfit. He wanted his own special forces. He wanted his own Green Berets. And I remember this meeting where he developed and came up with the Imperial Marines. He started the original boot camp. And that was his way of creating an elite group of people who could work harder, run faster. This was his new boot camp. They were coming up with who should be in the Imperial Marines. And they were going down a list. And they went, "And Mike Gimbel." I freaked out. I don't want to be an Imperial Marine. I went to Ron Cook's wife, and I said, "Look, you got to get me out of this." And she went to Ron, and they got me out of it.

Gary Williams ([22:54](#)):

I was recruited. It was the best of the best young men who were going to protect Synanon. It was an honor.

Sari Crawford ([23:06](#)):

Gary Williams was part of the last group of parents to have children in Synanon. And he was in one of the first groups of men to become Imperial Marines.

Gary Williams ([23:16](#)):

We were going to show the world that we weren't pushovers. The old man and other people that were running the place, they wanted to have a group that was readily available to carry out whatever assignment they gave them.

Robert Navarro ([23:36](#)):

So there was the Imperial Marines, but then they also put together something they called the Synanon National Guard.

Sari Crawford ([23:46](#)):

Robert Navarro wasn't an Imperial Marine. But Chuck liked the idea so much that he wanted more of the Synanon men to be combat-ready, in case his elite force needed any backup. So, the Imperial Marines started training more Synanon soldiers.

Robert Navarro ([24:04](#)):

We did various drills. We had weapons training. And we had a self-proclaimed martial arts expert. He taught us this martial arts discipline called shindo. We had a camp. We set up tents and a kitchen. And so, we were walking back, after being out bidwhacking all day for some goddamn reason. And a snake crossed the fire road, and somebody killed the rattlesnake. And we had it for dinner that night.

Sari Crawford ([24:46](#)):

The groups train near Chuck at the homeplace in Badger, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which were filled with rattlesnakes. They lived in camps, endured wilderness survival training, and conducted mock combat exercises.

Robert Navarro ([25:03](#)):

We did several drills where some people who weren't in the group would invade our camp, and then we'd have to protect the camp.

Sari Crawford ([25:14](#)):

Buddy Jones.

Buddy Jones ([25:16](#)):

One time, I went over to the camp to visit the Imperial Marines. And the guy who was in charge of it sent one guy to get me. And he was having a hard time, so he sent two, three. So they had six guys that finally took me down. And I wasn't even mad.

Sari Crawford ([25:38](#)):

Chuck continued to make radical statements on TV, surrounded by guards with guns. And now, he was training his own paramilitary group. His list of enemies was growing, and it included the media, most of all Time magazine, whose "kooky cult" profile had turned the public's perception against Synanon. He said that "if Time magazine planned to harm Synanon, then Synanon might have to harm them first."

Chuck Dederich ([26:10](#)):

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

Sari Crawford ([26:24](#)):

Ron Cook:

Ron Cook ([26:26](#)):

It was nonstop. It really was a war that was going on. Chuck, he would say, "People shouldn't be able to get away with just doing things and hiding."

News Reporter ([26:40](#)):

Synanon, under siege in what it describes as "a holy war" has taken the offensive, demonstrating against its enemies, suing detractors, and threatening to sue its critics.

Sari Crawford ([26:54](#)):

Chuck sued Time and other major media outlets for libel. He won settlements against the Hearst corporation and ABC, both times breaking the record for the largest payout in American history. But he still wasn't satisfied. He wanted to be praised for his contributions to society, not villainized.

Ron Cook ([27:15](#)):

There was a move, within Synanon, to get him nominated for the Nobel Prize for having developed Synanon.

Sari Crawford ([27:30](#)):

Chuck had a plan for how he was going to seize the recognition he felt he deserved. Robert Navarro.

Robert Navarro ([27:38](#)):

Chuck decided that he was going to open an embassy in Washington, DC because he felt, and he would say this, that he should have a seat at the table with the big boys. It was during President Carter's administration, and Carter had this drug czar and he said, "We should be there." The justification was Synanon was the most successful dope-beating business in America.

Sari Crawford ([28:09](#)):

In the summer of 1978, Chuck and his entourage purchased an entire apartment building called The Boston House on Massachusetts Avenue, just blocks away from the White House.

Robert Navarro ([28:25](#)):

They took over The Boston House, which was full of tenants. And then they kicked everybody out.

George Farnsworth ([28:34](#)):

It was part of his notion that Synanon would be some sort of model for the country. And the best place to model for the country would be in Washington.

Sari Crawford ([28:44](#)):

George Farnsworth was a lifestyle who was matched with a board member when everyone changed partners. And his new wife was one of Synanon's wealthiest donors.

George Farnsworth ([28:53](#)):

She felt it was a downgrade. Her husband at the time, Dan Garrett, he was the top lawyer. So, he was a big deal. He got a younger woman.

Sari Crawford ([29:05](#)):

But George got a status upgrade through his new marriage, which made him privy to what was happening in Washington DC.

George Farnsworth ([29:12](#)):

At one point, Chuck was invited to the White House. And they had this lunch in the staff mess. And he was crushed. He was expecting to be sitting in the Oval Office, having lunch with the President and his drug guy. He was really down about that.

Sari Crawford ([29:33](#)):

Back to Robert Navarro, whose wife was Chuck's chauffer in DC. She told Navarro that the mission wasn't going as planned.

Robert Navarro ([29:42](#)):

The Washington DC police, they got a report from the FBI that Synanon had made the largest gun purchase in the history of California. And Chuck had said something about how things would devolve in society. That caught their attention, and they began to look into it. And our actions there precipitated a lot of press attention.

George Farnsworth ([30:16](#)):

Chuck was out walking one day, but he had a cane with him. And a photographer wanted to take a picture of him, and he swung at him with the cane.

Robert Navarro ([30:28](#)):

And the guy fell over a hedge or something like that. And so, a subpoena was issued for Chuck's arrest. And so, that was the end of the embassy mission.

Sari Crawford ([30:43](#)):

The mission to Washington was a failure. Chuck thought it would help him gain credibility, but it only made him more controversial. Now he was in danger of going to jail for the second time in his life. The first time had been in the early days back in Santa Monica, when he was punished for standing up for his beliefs. This time, he had committed assault. So he decided to get out of town. And then, he decided to get out of the country.

Robert Navarro ([31:20](#)):

Chuck went on the lam after that.

Sari Crawford ([31:25](#)):

He and about a dozen members of his inner circle flew to Italy.

George Farnsworth ([31:28](#)):

It was a small seaside hotel in this little town of Formia. Chuck had a tendency at that time to think of himself as the Godfather. He called Dan Garrett his [foreign language 00:31:52].

Sari Crawford ([31:52](#)):

Chuck was hiding out, but he was enjoying himself. And he was thinking about starting all over.

Ron Cook ([32:00](#)):

He says, "Well, we ought to start a Synanon facility in Italy." He was trying to rebuild. "Forget all those people in the US; the ones that are trying to kill us, the ones trying to sue us. Let's just come over here and do this."

Sari Crawford ([32:17](#)):

Chuck and his entourage spent their days on the beach and nights having lavish dinners, where Chuck would pontificate, just like old times. But Chuck's demons had finally caught up with him.

George Farnsworth ([32:39](#)):

He would bring out bottles of wine, and we would start drinking. It was clear that he wanted us to keep him company while he drank. And we did. None of us drank as much as he did. It was binge drinking.

Ron Cook ([33:02](#)):

At the end of the day, we'd have a big dinner, start drinking some vino at the dinner and then drink some more vino. And then our problems went away. Chuck wanted out. He was trying to escape. He was defeated.

Sari Crawford ([33:26](#)):

Chuck had gone to great lengths to conquer his addictions. In many ways, he created Synanon just so he could surround himself with other people going through the same struggle, so they could go through it together. But his addictions found him again, even all the way in Italy, more than 20 years after his last drink.

Sari Crawford ([34:00](#)):

Back home, his followers were kept completely in the dark about the future of Synanon. Here's Buddy Jones and his wife, Lori.

Buddy Jones ([34:10](#)):

When he took off to Europe, they never told us that they were gone. He just took off.

Lori Jones ([34:18](#)):

They disappeared.

Buddy Jones ([34:19](#)):

They just disappeared.

Lori Jones ([34:22](#)):

So, we didn't hear directly from people, very much. But word got back that Chuck started drinking.

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

And just like that, it all hit the Joneses like a ton of bricks.

Lori Jones ([34:37](#)):

We were on a motorcycle ride, and Buddy just pulled over on the side of the freeway. And he said, "The fact that Chuck is drinking, that's it. He doesn't do anything halfway."

Buddy Jones ([34:55](#)):

Exactly what she said. He doesn't do things in moderate ways. Everything's big. And people are going to do what he's doing. And he's an alcoholic. I said, "Honey, Synanon is over."

George Farnsworth ([35:14](#)):

We thought, when he came back to California, that he would stop drinking. But he didn't.

Sari Crawford ([35:42](#)):

This is George Farnsworth. At the end of the summer in 1978, Chuck returned from Italy with his entourage. And he brought his old habit with him.

George Farnsworth ([35:54](#)):

We all thought it was a very bad idea. Some people, like his son, Chuck Junior, thought he should be thrown out of Synanon. But that was a non-starter; that couldn't happen. Everybody went along with him, as always.

Sari Crawford ([36:14](#)):

Here's Miriam Bourdett, my dad's ex-wife.

Miriam Bourdette ([36:18](#)):

I remembered having my first glass of alcohol in... I don't know what year it was, but ever since I had been in Synanon. I had an intuition that he was getting a lot worse. I knew that trouble lay ahead.

Sari Crawford ([36:41](#)):

Ron Cook:

Ron Cook ([36:43](#)):

One of his rationalization was drinking was to get everybody else drinking too. For a while, it was a lot of fun. We had some great parties.

Sari Crawford ([36:55](#)):

Here's Zoe Bagger, who talked in an earlier episode about the neglect and abuse she experienced as a Synanon kid.

Zoe Bagger ([37:03](#)):

They had Saturday night parties, and they were just the most embarrassing. It would've just been the grossest reality show on the planet. People drinking, making out with people who were not their spouse. Just every yucky thing. And we would be sitting on the balcony, watching them do this; make complete fools of themselves. When the night was over, there were literally just trays and trays and trays of half-empty alcohol bottles. I was too young, but I know that some of the older kids would finish those off.

Sari Crawford ([37:47](#)):

Jeff Becker:

Jeff Becker ([37:49](#)):

I had drinks. Not to what he was doing. Not to what Chuck was doing. And Chuck was falling apart. There are people that, "I think drank himself to death."

Sari Crawford ([38:03](#)):

Margo McCartney spoke, last episode ,about how the Synanon game became a tool for manipulation.

Margo McCartney ([38:10](#)):

It wasn't a good thing for me to start drinking. It wasn't good for any of the addicts to start drinking because many of us had hep C. And some people died. It might have been fine for the squares, but it wasn't for the addicts. It was just another door thrown open that had been closed.

Sari Crawford ([38:39](#)):

From the beginning, Chuck only had two rules for his followers in Synanon: no drugs or alcohol and no violence of any kind. Now there were no rules anymore. Synanon had always moved in the direction of Chuck's ideas. But however radical, they had always been sober thoughts. Now he was increasingly under the influence, and his most loyal followers were still very much under the influence of Chuck Dietrich.

Chuck Dederich ([39:13](#)):

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. I think that is the new religious posture. Don't mess with us. You can get killed dead. Physically dead.

Phil Ritter ([39:36](#)):

I was in Berkeley, and I was friendly with a woman who had two young boys. And she was interested in sharing a house. And so, we rented a house together in Berkeley.

Sari Crawford ([39:58](#)):

This is Phil Ritter. He had split after the vasectomies, and now he was in the middle of a custody battle with Synanon over his young daughter. His wife, Lynn, had stayed in Synanon when he left. Their daughter lived with her, and Lynn had been matched with the new partner. Phil and his lawyers threatened to subpoena Chuck and make him testify under oath about what was happening in Synanon. He had been visited by two high-ranking Synanon members, who warned him not to do it. On September 21st, 1978, Phil Ritter pulled into his driveway after picking up groceries.

Phil Ritter ([40:48](#)):

I came home and got out of the car. And two guys, who had stockings pulled over their heads and over their faces so that you couldn't really tell who they were, started wailing on me with these clubs they had. At least a few minutes, they were beating on me. The younger boy had seen me drive into the

driveway. And he always came running out of the house and gave me a greeting when I came home. And he stood there in the doorstep, watching these guys beat me up, horrified.

Sari Crawford ([41:37](#)):

That young boy was named Mikel Jollett. He was a Synanon child who had left the community with his mom. He remembers what happened to Phil that day and wrote about it in his memoir, Hollywood Park. He talks about it here in an interview with NPR.

Mikel Jollett ([41:56](#)):

I'd always come out when he got home. And he got out, and he smiled at me. And they just walked up behind him and started beating him. And he fell on the ground, and he started screaming. And our eyes locked. And they beat him into a coma.

Sari Crawford ([42:22](#)):

Phil suffered a broken arm, leg, and a fractured skull. He was in a coma for two weeks before regaining consciousness.

Phil Ritter ([42:34](#)):

I ran into a nurse who had taken care of me early on. And she said, "I really did not expect to see you again."

Sari Crawford ([42:51](#)):

The police had very few leads about his attackers. Phil didn't say anything about his daughter or the men from Synanon who had come to see him shortly before the attack.

Phil Ritter ([43:03](#)):

Well, it was weird. You would think that I would connect the dots and link Synanon to it and start accusing Synanon of it. I told the Berkeley police that for all I knew it was somebody who saw me take some money out of the bank machine. I just couldn't believe that my friends from Synanon would do that.

Sari Crawford ([43:26](#)):

Phil knew his relationship with Synanon had turned adversarial, but he didn't think Chuck or anyone else in Synanon was capable of such a violent attack, especially against one of their own. He didn't realize how quickly things were changing in Synanon. Maybe he didn't want to know.

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

But he had committed several mortal sins in Chuck's eyes. He had challenged Chuck's authority. Then he split. Then he went to the police. Then he tried to get his daughter out of the community. And worst of all, he was working with lawyers. Chuck's list of enemies was long. But maybe even worse than his unruly neighbors or ungrateful splitees or the lying media were the greedy lawyers.

News Reporter ([44:31](#)):

We either think we have a good thing here, or we don't. If we have a good thing here, then we are not going to permit people like greedy lawyers to destroy it.

Sari Crawford ([44:42](#)):

There was one lawyer who stood out, who Chuck perceived to be on a mission against Synanon, against Chuck himself: the lawyer who helped Synanon kids leave the community, Paul Morantz.

News Reporter ([44:59](#)):

I'm quite willing to break some lawyer's legs and then tell him this: "Next time, I'm going to break your wife's legs and then cut your kid's arm off. And try me. Because this is only a sample, you son of a bitch. And that's the end of your lawyer.

Sari Crawford ([45:30](#)):

On October 10th, 1978, a few weeks after Phil Ritter was attacked in his driveway, a car idled outside of a house in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles. A man got out of the passenger side and approached the front door. He returned to the car a short time later, and the driver took off. Later that evening, Paul Morantz pulled into the driveway of that same house, where he lived.

Sari Crawford ([46:12](#)):

Morantz went inside and checked his mailbox, which was built into the wall just inside the front door and was covered by a metal grill. He could see that there was something inside, something with an odd shape. Thinking it was a package, he reached in to grab it. And when he did, something lunged at him and struck him on the hand. That's when he realized what it was. Paul Morantz was bitten by a rattlesnake. Unlike Phil Ritter, Morantz had no doubt who was responsible. He ran outside and yelled to a neighbor to call an ambulance. He said he had been bitten by a rattlesnake, and he told her, "It's Synanon." Next time on The Sunshine Place:

Ron Cook ([47:23](#)):

I got a telephone call saying, "Come quick. Chuck is being arrested."

Sari Crawford ([47:28](#)):

Chuck Dietrich becomes the prime suspect in the violence linked to Synanon. And it's only the tip of the iceberg.

Robert Navarro ([47:35](#)):

I remember reading a report to Chuck's office. It had a section in it called October is the Month of the Hunt. That was sort of a hit list.

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

It looked like my dad was going to be next.

Sylvia Crawford ([47:50](#)):

As you look at the list, of course Paul Morantz was on it. Phil Ritter is on the list. And Bill Crawford is on the list.

This transcript was exported on Sep 15, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Sari Crawford ([48:03](#)):

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