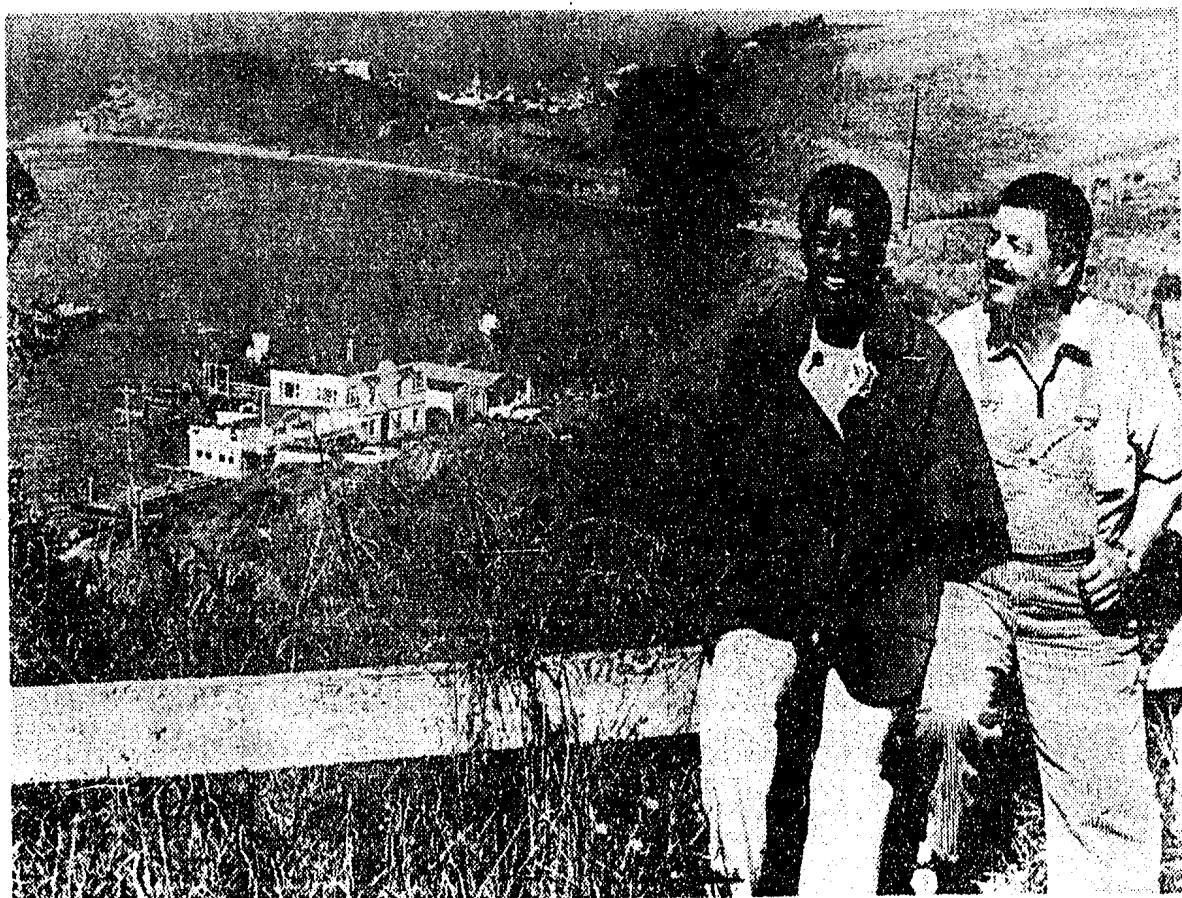


'Synanon': No Opponents

By Mary Wiegers

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pg. D1

Mr. and Mrs. Chuck Dederich: First a social movement, next a city.

'Synanon': No Opponents

First of a series

By Mary Wiegers

SAN FRANCISCO—In a small recreation room, two men are rigorously batting a little white ball across a wooden table.

At first glance, almost anyone would identify the game as ping pong. Round paddles, the ball, net, and a green table marked with white lines.

They'd be wrong. The game is called Zen Pong, and the object is to keep the ball in play, not to score points against an opponent. In fact, the men are not opponents. They're working together to develop their skill at making the arcs as perfect as possible, the pace as quick, their reactions better and better.

One of the men is the inventor of the game, Chuck Dederich. The game is sport for him, but it's also symbolic, like the tennis game in "Blowup."

In that "Blowup" game, everybody's form looked good because there was no ball, Dederich points out. In his game, there's a ball, but no competition. And

he claims two people helping one another to perfect their skill can be as stimulating and satisfying as two people competing against one another.

To Dederich, the point is as important as it is simple. He's already built a social movement around it, and he's planning to build a city around it.

Chuck Dederich is the founder of an organization called the Synanon Foundation. Those who have heard of it at all connect it with the rehabilitation of drug addicts.

That's the way it started some 10 years ago. Today, they still take in dope addicts, alcoholics and people with acute hangups, but the foundation has grown into more than that. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, sociologists, mechanics, salesmen—all varieties of people become involved.

It's hard to classify what Synanon is, a fact that scares a lot of people, including the local government. They want to be able to define (and possibly confine) it to terms like rehabilitation center, hospital, school,

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There Are No Opponents in 'Synanon'

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psycho-therapy group, charity. It's all of those things, but none of them define it.

"It's a social movement," Dederich tells people. It's also an attempt to transform the quality of life.

Physically, the "social movement" called Synanon now exists in eight cities from Detroit to Santa Monica to Puerto Rico. It has about 8,000 members, holds \$8 million worth of real estate, operates two businesses, a private bus company, its own medical and dental clinics and its own educational system.

Synanon's biggest operation and headquarters is in California, where, for some reason, social innovations, fads and cults of all calibers, seem to grow like corn in Iowa.

In Santa Monica, the foundation has its school, its child care centers, its clinics. It owns a club on the beach, 120 apartment units, a service station, numerous trucks, cars and a bus line to transport its residents.

In Oakland, Calif., Synanon owns a 12-story former athletic club, 72 apartment units, a warehouse, tractor-trailer trucks and a filling station.

Their new city is at Tomales Bay, a lovely setting overlooking the water in the hills 25 miles north of San Francisco. They have 60 acres with option to buy 1,000. They call it their research center, a sort of think tank, where Dederich now lives amid the construction of habitat-like dwellings.

In San Diego, Detroit, Reno, New York and Puerto Rico, the foundation has only "club house" facilities.

The physical side is impressive, since it started with one man, a relief check and a theory, and grew to its present size in 10 years. But it's the human side of what goes on in Synanon that's thought provoking.

What goes on is men and women conducting a human experiment—attempting to live in a way in which education becomes a part of the life process, and the most important subject of study is how a man can live with himself and other individuals.

The people attempting it are not experts—not technicians, psychologists, sociologists — in short not an educated elite with a theory trying to apply it to the abstract masses. They are individuals working it out by day-to-day living.

The simplest way to understand how it works is to understand how it began.

It began with Dederich and an idea. Dederich is an enormous man with a drooping mustache and drooping eyelids who looks something like a tuskless walrus. He lumbers around in overalls and a variety of wildly printed or striped shirts, adding to his straight-out-of-Alice-in-Wonderland appearance. He's been called an egotist, a madman, a saint, an opportunist, an earthquake, a herd of one elephant.

He was born in Toledo, Ohio, on March 22, 1913. By the time he was a teen-ager, his father, an alcoholic, had been killed in a car crash, his younger brother had died and his mother had remarried a man he hated. Dederich, himself, had started drinking.

After dropping out of Notre Dame because of bad grades, he drifted from job to job until he came to Ocean Park, Calif., at the age of 45, with two bad marriages, a ruined business career, and years as an alcoholic behind him.

In Ocean Park, he joined Alcoholics Anonymous, straightened out and decided to help others do the same.

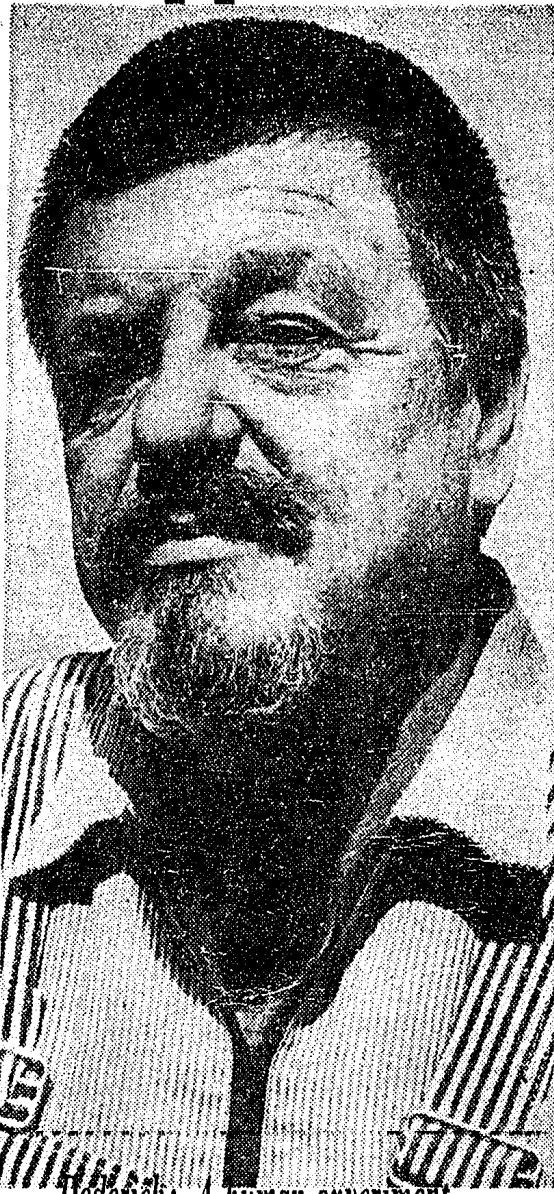
In a shabby flat in the worst part of town, Dederich set up shop. He took his \$33-a-week unemployment check, bought coffee, candy bars, cigarettes and waited.

Soon his flat came to be known as a place where an alcoholic could get help. He offered them food, shelter and a place to come when they needed to talk. They also got a liberal dose of his philosophy, which states in part, that crime, alcoholism and drug addiction is "stupid"; that each man bears responsibility for his own life; that every man has problems, but to use them as an excuse to waste his life is stupid.

Addiction, Dederich believes, is a symptom of a deeper "character disorder" and that's what the alcoholics tried to get at in their informal group discussions.

Then, a few drug addicts started drifting into the group, and before long, some of them began staying away from drugs for periods up to seven weeks.

When the addicts started staying clean, Dederich



Dederich: A human experiment.

knew he was on to something. By September, 1958, Synanon (the word comes from an addict's garbled attempt to pronounce "seminar") was incorporated as a nonprofit foundation. With 40 members, it moved into a former National Guard Armory in Santa Monica.

Soon, its phenomenal "cure rate" of addicts—"nine times the cure rate of any other program," according to New York psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Casriel — began attracting attention.

The method was simple. While most programs tried gradual withdrawal or drug substitutes, Synanon demanded total and immediate withdrawal.

Any addict who walks in the door is given the same ground rules. He will be given food and a place to sleep. In return, he will have had his last fix. Someone will stay with him and look after him while he is going through withdrawal.

When he is through it, he will be given a menial job, such as dishwasher or busboy in the kitchen; he will attend the group discussions or "Synanon game" three times a week, and he will not be allowed to write, telephone or contact friends or family for 90 days, or leave the building, until he is given permission to do so.

Slowly, as he adjusts and stays clean, the group sessions are tapered off and he is given jobs of more responsibility and allowed to go out of the building and see family or friends.

He is free, of course, to quit the program at any point. But if he stays in, he must abide by the discipline.

Reid Kimball, an ex-addict, now a member of the Synanon board, explained the need for strict discipline. "It's probably his friends that are rushing the stuff on him, and if he's free to see them right away, chances are they're going to talk him into taking a fix. It's probably his family that's causing his hangups, or at least aggravating them, so he needs to get totally away from his former environment until he can handle himself. His first problem is that he can't come to terms with society, so he needs to drop out of that society for a while."

The Synanon game, now the mainstay of the Synanon life style, provides the group pressure to change his life. His attitudes and performance are criticized, but by people in his same age group and who, until recently, were in the same boat themselves. "He also has a chance to talk about his personal problems and have people listen. He can throw the criticism back at them, too," Kimball said.

"Soon, he begins to realize that the people in the game with him know him better than anybody else on earth, and he knows them better than anybody else. Then he recognizes that these people really care about him. He begins to care about them."

Kimball tried to relate from this personal experience of 18 years as an addict why this method works, when state institutions, psycho-therapy and other methods generally fail.

"I bounced in and out of a state hospital like a tennis ball. Seven hours after leaving, I'd be back on dope. Besides the overcrowding and lack of personal attention, the fact is I'd have my eye on the parole board the minute I entered the front gate. My whole bit while I was there was to con the authorities so I could get out.

"Sure there was a psychiatrist there, but if you verbalized your hang-ups too much they'd put you down for shock treatments, and I'd do or say anything to stay away from that."

After he got out, Kimball would continue to see the psychiatrist, "but I'd get loaded to steady my nerves when I talked to him."

Lewis Yablonsky, a sociologist, who's written a book on Synanon called "The Tunnel Back," says, "Most other therapeutic programs are unable to reach the addict because of his hostility and desire to deceive the authorities. Synanon has completely destroyed the 'we-they' attitude which destroys other programs."