

For Squares: Open House At Synanon

By GERTRUDE SAMUELS

OAKLAND, Calif. — The winding hillside drives here afford the visitor an awesome, soul-inviting panorama of the harbor and hills of San Francisco. If grand vistas are all he seeks, it will suffice. But should he have a taste for more meaty fare, for a soul-stretching, close-in view of another, more relevant sort, the visitor might well descend to Clay and 13th Streets in a seedy section of downtown Oakland. What he sees and experiences within the 12-story building that is Synanon House will remain with him long after all memory of the panorama has vanished.

Synanon is a full-time, live-in community for former drug addicts and for former alcoholics and others who find themselves unable to cope with their problems. They live in a totally drug-free community, racially integrated, with its own special life style. Here 500 men and women (a third of Synanon's national enrollment) are learning to restructure their lives, to "grow up," and in the process they seek the understanding and support of the public.

Sober Soiree

Saturday is "open house" and party night at Synanon in Oakland — as it is at the other community houses in Detroit, San Diego, Santa Monica and Tomales Bay/Marshall (north of San Francisco). Anyone who is sober and willing to abide by Synanon rules is welcome, starting around 9 P.M. There is no charge for the "get acquainted" and orientation session, guided tour, entertainment and dancing; coffee and other (non-alcoholic) beverages are free. Visitors are also welcome on weekday afternoons and evenings, but since every resident of Synanon has a regular five-day-a-week job, Saturday night is the best drop-in time.

In the last year, this once-decrepit building has been transformed by the residents, with community support. The visitor, taken around by a member of the club, sees a little bit of everything: the beige-and-blue carpeted individual rooms for seminars and group interaction sessions; the workshops in carpentry and plumbing; the "Well" on the ground floor—an immense room, divided into classrooms where such subjects as biology and geology are taught. One can see these educational workshops in action, since residents often immerse themselves in these activities over entire weekends.

The visitor may also tour the "Hut" — a large, comfortable, living-room-style section where women residents can, at their leisure, come to talk, read, sew, take a sauna. He will see the gymnasium and swimming pool, which were part of the athletic club that once occupied the site and get vigorous use from members (though not visitors).

In the "Woodshed," visitors, professional people, housewives and their children and newcomers planning to join Synanon, are welcomed to an information and orientation session. Here they learn about the Synanon game — "it's a kind of tool," one speaker explained, "to allow people to communicate directly and overcome distrust, suspicions and hostilities without any prohibition on language."

Iron Rule

"We don't want you here," everyone — visitor and potential member alike — is told firmly, "if you're not committed to not using drugs or any other chemicals."

Above all, it is the human transformation, stimulated by the "games," that the visitor glimpses in tours of these strata of Synanon's life style. Games and "stews" (another kind of interaction session) may be in progress during the outsider's visit, but normally he is not permitted to sit in on them. (Privacy is needed for the games, but

the more important reason is that the visitor viewing just one part of a game or stew would probably come away more confused than enlightened.)

The game is a limited group encounter which employs attack therapy — verbal mayhem only, of course — in which members are derided for their "stupidity" and "dumbness." In a stew, members throw every kind of ridicule into the "pot" for the "stew-dents" to attack one particular member (the stew is an open-ended game continuing for 24 hours); the member put down is always "picked up" in the end. A lot of gutter language and verbal fury is ventilated but the violence ends at the door, until the next game or stew. The basic goal is to stimulate change in a person.

As Charles (Chuck) Dederich, Synanon's founder, likes to put it: "We're not just a narcotics cure. We're a social movement to help people learn how to live."

Everyone Plays

The program has won the support of Oakland Mayor John H. Reading and of Police Chief C. R. Gain who has enrolled several score of his officers in the Synanon games. Several Black Panthers also come to the games.

Why do "squares" — outsiders with no narcotic hangup — visit Synanon? On a recent Saturday evening, among the several hundred visitors touring the building with their Synanon guide-members was Paul Pearce, a Bay Area engineer; his wife Sheila, a secretary, and their 14-year-old daughter Elaine. Elaine said she had come out of curiosity: "I know people at my school who're on drugs."

"Oh, no!" her mother said, shocked.

"Yes," Elaine insisted. "Once I just happened to open a girl's locker — she couldn't get it open herself, too sick or something — and she said she'd just dropped some bennies. She was taken to the hospital."

Chester Stern, director of Oakland House, had told me, "When I came to Synanon in 1963, the average age was 32. Now here we are seven years later, and the average age of Synanon residents is 21. How do you explain it? Read the papers — drugs are so damn common now it seems to me that the day after a baby's weaned he's out somewhere looking to change his particular state of mind, smoking some grass, dropping some downers (barbiturates), ingesting some uppers (methedrine), or even sniffing some fire-extinguisher fluid. Then if that doesn't suffice, he can always jab some old-fashioned heroin into his veins, or drop some acid (LSD)."

The Percer's guide was Carole Friedman, 26, an Ohio-born member of Syna-

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non who lives in one of the housekeeping units for squares. There are 1,500 square members of Synanon's "games clubs" operating during the week as discussion groups; in addition, there are many squares—about 60 in the Oakland club alone — who have moved into Synanon in order to participate in all the aspects of its life. Like Miss Friedman, they continue with their businesses or professions on the outside but live either at the club or in the nearby housekeeping units called "caves."

An important source of income for Synanon comes from these so-called life-stylers, who give all or part of their income to Synanon and give their services (teaching, legal, medical and the like) free. This new strata of Synanon life has been developing in the past two years. (Other financial support comes from relatives of residents, and from the operation of Synanon gas stations, and the sale of such imprinted items as pens, lighters and notebooks.)

Building a School

As Miss Friedman, a cum laude graduate of Brandeis University who teaches at Berkeley High School, explained her square status at Synanon: "Synanon is my family now. We're literally building a 'school' here through our life style."

Bill Crawford, member of Synanon's Board of Regents, says: "The squares do what they can to help Synanon because they know we're tuned in to the fact that there are many problems in society, not just those of addiction which started us out. They come aboard because they think they need help on their own problems."

A large group of students was being piloted around by Peter Graff, a former probation officer for Solano County, California, who teaches a course in drug abuse at San Joaquin Delta College. He is also Dean of Students at the University of California-Davis campus. In his group was Mrs. Lulie Ryon, an elementary school teacher visiting Synanon for the first time. "Drugs are coming to the lower and lower age group," she said. "I'm worried—I guess because I'm a square — and I want to know why this is happening."

A crowd had gathered in the "Woodshed" — visitors and new members mainly—for the orientation, which took about an hour. The audience sat on straight-backed chairs, relaxed and drinking coffee, as they listened to a life-styler and two ex-addicts clue them in to life in Synanon. The talk centered on human behavior, not the addiction or the alcoholism, or the psychological problems that break people down.

Some visitors, one speaker said, "are

checking the place because they have a dope-friend, brother or relative," and some, he cracks, "come looking for guys and girls." Young Arnold, a black former addict from Harlem, who now goes to schools and clubs on speaking engagements for Synanon, tells the visitors, "When I came in three years ago, I was 110 pounds and strung out. Then I got in the games. I hadn't meant to stay in Synanon at first—but it saved my life."

By 10 o'clock, members, guests and tourists had assembled in the ballroom for the program and entertainment. I sat next to Danielle Wilhelm, not long in the States from Paris. A pretty young woman in a pink wool dress, she said in her accented English, "I was just telling this gentleman here that I was in a rut. I live with my daughter — I'm divorced — and I thought I'd just come and see what it's like. I think . . . mainly out of boredom I came. Well, I've already made a friend." Her new friend patted her hand.

On stage, the Synanon five-piece band had assembled, and Al Bauman was at the microphone. Bauman, the new director of Synanon-Oakland, introduced a Synanon youngster, who led off with the Synanon prayer:

Please let me first and always examine myself

Let me be honest and truthful

Let me seek and assume responsibility

Let me give rather than receive.

Dungareed and informal, Bauman now used the "entertaining monologue" format to pump out information to the rest of the house, running down the coming week's events (a new Synanon service station was opening a dozen blocks from the club) and welcoming the visitors with gentle wisecracks: "Sex is so public these days that everything else is private. We've reversed that at Synanon: sex is private and everything else is public. This is our living room. Our life style is public."

Time for Music

The band played popular music. (In the "Woodshed," there was now a rock band for the young people and "those who think young.") René Hobbs, ex-addict, a black girl in a gold-spangled tunic, sang "Getting To Know You" in a clear, joyous tone. On other typical Saturday evenings, the Synanon choir of 22 members sing their own compositions with the band. Many members of Synanon come from the entertainment world and can write their own music. "Sounds of Synanon," original band music, has been recorded (Pacific Jazz label). Stan Kenton, the orchestra leader, lives at Synanon; Hazel Scott and Pete Seeger have entertained from time to time.

Then the ballroom floor was cleared for the highlight of every Saturday open house: the Synanon hoopla. There were hundreds on the floor, assembled in long rows, one person behind the other, residents and squares and visitors, all dancing with lively abandon what has become known as the Synanon "tribal dance." No one touches in this hoopla, everyone executing steps and turning and twisting around together — doing his own thing to the Synanon composition being blasted out by the band. The hoopla can stretch to 10 or 15 minutes. One feels, watching this sort of square dance in modern dress—or what Chester Stern calls "a non-violent dance riot"—that no one had to touch to experience the feeling of being together and being free.

By about midnight, Synanon's open house had closed.

One postscript for visitors: Synanon formerly provided members with all the cigarettes they wanted to ease their way from drug addiction; now there is a rule against smoking. Officials admit that giving up cigarettes can be as rough for some as giving up narcotics, but as one spokesman put it, "We're against all pollution."

The no-smoking rule goes for visitors, too, in all the clubs. There are no ash trays at Synanon.