

March 4, 1997

Charles Dederich, 83, Synanon Founder, Dies

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Charles E. Dederich, a reformed alcoholic who founded Synanon, the drug rehabilitation program that won widespread acclaim and amassed great wealth before it became associated with violence, died on Friday in Kaweah Delta Hospital in Visalia, Calif. Mr. Dederich, who lived in Visalia, was 83.

Mr. Dederich had several strokes beginning in the late 1980's. The cause of death was cardiorespiratory failure, said his wife, Ginny.

Founded in 1958 with a \$33 unemployment check in a seedy flat in Ocean Park, Calif., Synanon eventually attracted thousands of drug addicts and dropouts from the social turbulence of the 1960's to therapeutic communities for a course of tough, innovative treatment.

"Crime is stupid, delinquency is stupid and the use of narcotics is stupid," Mr. Dederich once said. "What Synanon is dealing with is addiction to stupidity."

Synanon and its methods became the subject of books, articles, television documentaries and a 1965 film, "Synanon," which starred Edmond O'Brien as Mr. Dederich and Eartha Kitt as his third wife, Bettye.

By 1980, with millions of dollars in donations from American businesses, vast real estate holdings, overseas branches and its own lucrative enterprises Synanon, which was exempt from Federal and state taxes as a charitable trust, had compiled assets of \$30 million to \$50 million, according to the estimates of law-enforcement authorities.

But the organization, which claimed credit for thousands of rehabilitations, evolved from a renowned drug rehabilitation agency into what California officials described as a wealthy, authoritarian cult.

Accounts of violence and the insistence by Mr. Dederich on forced vasectomies for men in Synanon, mandatory abortions for women and the divorce of more than 230 of its married couples who were to switch to other partners led to investigations and unfavorable newspaper publicity.

In 1980, Mr. Dederich pleaded no contest to charges that he and two members of Synanon's security force had conspired to commit murder by placing a four-and-a-half-foot rattlesnake in the mailbox of a lawyer who had sued the organization.

The lawyer, Paul Morantz, who was acting on behalf of former Synanon members and relatives of members who maintained they were being held in the organization against their will, was bitten and hospitalized for six days.

Mr. Dederich, who said he was in poor health, was sentenced to five years' probation, fined \$5,000 and ordered not to participate actively in running Synanon.

By the middle of the 1980's, when the organization declared itself a religion, was condemned by the Government for a corporate policy of "terror and violence" and was stripped of its tax-exempt status, Synanon was declining in influence and prestige.

Charles Edwin Dederich, who was named for his father and known generally as Chuck, was born in Toledo, Ohio, on March 22, 1913.

When he was 4, his father, an alcoholic, was killed in an automobile accident. He was 8 when a brother died and 12 when his mother, the former Agnes Kountz, a classical concert singer, married a man he loathed.

Mr. Dederich was drinking heavily before he graduated from high school. He dropped out of the University of Notre Dame after 18 months because of poor grades and lost good jobs and two wives because of his drinking. When he was 43, he joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and after a while he turned his apartment in Ocean Park into a sanctuary first for alcoholics and soon for drug addicts as well.

"I say this with as much humility as I am capable, which isn't very much, but when I sit down and start to talk, people start gathering," he said in a 1980 deposition. "It is inevitable. No matter where I do that, it just happens. I can't stop it."

Underlying Synanon's approach was the conviction that addicts were not adults, and it was futile to try to cure them with adult procedures.

Mr. Dederich discarded Alcoholics Anonymous's emphasis on religion and built a methodology around a therapeutic community, a tough, disciplined, drug-free environment with a dash of tender loving care.

Attack therapy was an essential component of the treatment. Three times weekly, members met in small groups, for violently outspoken discussions, called games or synanons, in which they released pent-up hostilities.

On Sept. 15, 1958, Synanon -- a name coined when an addict stumbled over the words "seminar" and "symposium," gave up and called them "synanon" -- was incorporated as a nonprofit California foundation with 40 members.

Mr. Dederich's widow said it was in the early days of Synanon that he created the saying, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Mr. Dederich was married four times. Two of his wives left him because of his drinking. His third wife, Bettye, died in 1977. Besides his widow, the former Ginny Schorin, whom he married nearly 20 years ago, Mr. Dederich is survived by a son from his first marriage, Chuck, of Visalia; a daughter from his second marriage, Jady Dederich of San Francisco, and three grandchildren.

Photo: Charles E. Dederich. (United Press International, 1980)