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The Trouble with Troubled Teen Programs

How the "boot camp" industry tortures and kills kids

[Maia Szalavitz](#) | January 2007 [Print Edition](#)

The state of Florida tortured 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson to death for trespassing. The teen had been sentenced to probation in 2005 for taking a joy ride in a Jeep Cherokee that his cousins stole from his grandmother. Later that year, he crossed the grounds of a school on his way to visit a friend, a violation of his probation. His parents were given a choice between sending him to boot camp and sending him to juvenile detention. They chose boot camp, believing, as many Americans do, that “tough love” was more likely to rehabilitate him than prison.

Less than three hours after his admission to Florida’s Bay County Sheriff’s Boot Camp on January 5, 2006, Anderson was no longer breathing. He was taken to a hospital, where he was declared dead early the next morning.

A video recorded by the camp shows up to 10 of the sheriff’s “drill instructors” punching, kicking, slamming to the ground, and dragging the limp body of the unresisting adolescent. Anderson had reported difficulty breathing while running the last of 16 required laps on a track, a complaint that was interpreted as defiance. When he stopped breathing entirely, this too was seen as a ruse.

Ammonia was shoved in the boy’s face; this tactic apparently had been used previously to shock other boys perceived as resistant into returning to exercises. The guards also applied what they called “pressure points” to Anderson’s head with their hands, one of many “pain compliance” methods they had been instructed to impose on children who didn’t immediately do as they were told.

All the while, a nurse in a white uniform stood by, looking bored. At one point she examined the boy with a stethoscope, then allowed the beating to continue until he was unconscious. An autopsy report issued in May—after an initial, disputed report erroneously attributed Anderson’s death to a blood disorder—concluded that he had died of suffocation, due to the combined effects of ammonia and the guards’ covering his mouth and nose.

Every time a child dies in a tough love program, politicians say—as Florida Gov. Jeb Bush initially did on hearing of Anderson’s death—that it is “one tragic incident” that should not be used to justify shutting such programs down. But there have now been nearly three dozen such deaths and thousands of reports of severe abuse in programs that use corporal punishment, brutal emotional attacks, isolation, and physical restraint in an attempt to reform troubled teenagers.

Tough love has become a billion-dollar industry. Several hundred programs, both public and private, use the approach. Somewhere between 10,000 and 100,000 teenagers are currently held in treatment programs based on the belief that adolescents must be broken (mentally, and often physically as well)

before they can be fixed. Exact numbers are impossible to determine, because no one keeps track of the kids in these programs, most of which are privately run. The typical way to end up in a government-run program, such as the camp where Martin Lee Anderson was killed, is for a court to give you the option of going there instead of prison. The typical way to end up in a private program is to be sent there by your parents, though judges and public schools have been known to send kids to private boot camps as well. Since they offer “treatment,” some of the private centers are covered by health insurance.

In the nearly five decades since the first tough love residential treatment community, Synanon, introduced the idea of attack therapy as a cure for drug abuse, hundreds of thousands of young people have undergone such “therapy.” These programs have both driven and been driven by the war on drugs. Synanon, for example, was aimed at fighting heroin addiction, its draconian methods justified by appeals to parents’ fears that drugs could do far worse things to their children than a little rough treatment could. The idea was that only a painful experience of “hitting bottom” could end an attachment to the pleasures of drugs.

But like the drug war itself, tough love programs are ineffective, based on pseudoscience, and rooted in a brutal ideology that produces more harm than most of the problems they are supposedly aimed at addressing. The history of tough love shows how fear consistently trumps data, selling parents and politicians on a product that hurts kids.

Attack Therapy Utopia

Synanon was a supposedly utopian California community founded in 1958 by an ex-alcoholic named Chuck Dederich. Dederich believed he could improve on the voluntary 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Rather than rely on people choosing to change, Synanon would use extreme peer pressure and even physical coercion to impose the confession, surrender, and service to others that 12-step programs suggest as the road to recovery.

At the time, heroin addiction was seen as incurable. But when a heroin addict kicked drugs after participating in Dederich’s brutally confrontational encounter groups, the founder and other members began living communally and promoting Synanon as an addiction cure.

The media took note, and soon state officials from across the country were visiting and setting up copycat programs back home to treat addicts. Only New Jersey bothered to do an outcome study before replicating Synanon. The investigation, released in 1969, found that only 10 to 15 percent of participants stayed in the program for more than a few months and actually ended their addictions, a rate no better than that achieved without treatment. A 1973 study of encounter groups by the Stanford psychiatrist Irvin Yalom and his colleague Morton Lieberman found that 9 percent of participants experienced lasting psychological damage and that Synanon groups were among those with the highest numbers of casualties.

But the research didn’t matter. To both the media and the politicians, anecdote was evidence. The idea that toughness was the answer had a deep appeal to those who saw drug use as sin and punishment as the way to redemption. And Synanon produced testimonials worthy of a revival meeting. Indeed, it eventually recast itself as the “Church of Synanon.”

By the early 1970s, the federal government itself had funded its own Synanon clone. It was located in Florida and known as The Seed.

In this program, teenagers who were using drugs or who were believed to be at risk of doing so would spend 10-to-12-hour days seated on hard-backed chairs and waving furiously to catch the attention of staffers, most of whom were former participants themselves. Like Arnold Horshack in *Welcome Back*,

Kotter but with more desperate urgency, they would flutter their hands, begging to be called on to confess their bad behavior. Even before the excesses of the '80s, parents were so frightened of drugs that they were willing to surrender their children to strangers for tough treatment to avoid even the possibility of addiction; some parents even hit their children themselves at Seed meetings, following the instructions of program leaders.

When kids entered The Seed, they lived in “host homes” —houses of parents of other program participants that had been specially prepared to incarcerate teenagers at night. If these “newcomers” didn't give convincing enough confessions in group sessions, they would not be allowed to “progress” in the program and return to home and school.

In 1974 Sen. Sam Ervin, the North Carolina Democrat best known for heading the congressional committee that investigated Watergate, presented a report to Congress entitled “Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification.” Ervin and other members of Congress were concerned about federal funding for efforts to change people's behavior against their will, seeing a fundamental threat to liberty if such efforts were successful. The report cited The Seed as an example of programs that “begin by subjecting the individual to isolation and humiliation in a conscious effort to break down his psychological defenses.” It concluded that such programs are “similar to the highly refined brainwashing techniques employed by the North Koreans in the early 1950's.”

The Seed Germinates

Ervin's report led Congress to cut off The Seed's funding. But The Seed had produced two important true believers: Mel Sembler, who went on to serve as campaign finance chairman for the Republican Party during the 2000 election season and as U.S. ambassador to Italy from 2001 to 2005, and Joseph Zappala, who would go on to serve under the first President Bush as ambassador to Spain and who at the time was also a major Republican campaign donor.

In 1976 Sembler and Zappala founded a program virtually identical to The Seed, staffed by former Seed parents and participants (including some who had become Seed staffers). They named it Straight Incorporated. The federal agency that had funded The Seed, the Law Enforcement Assistance Agency, had been barred from funding further human experiments because neither the agency nor projects like The Seed had procedures for informed consent. Despite that fact, and despite the congressional critique of The Seed, Straight soon received federal money from the same agency. It, too, never informed parents that it was experimental.

Straight expanded rapidly in the '80s, around the same time newspapers, TV, and other media were filled with dire warnings about the dangers of crack. Nancy Reagan called it her “favorite” drug program. In fact, it was a visit to Straight, suggested by Sembler, that had inspired the first lady to make drugs her cause.

An undated issue of Straight's newsletter, *Epidemic*, from around this time carried a photo of the legs of a young-looking corpse with a tag on one toe: “Cocaine, crack and kids.” The accompanying article said crack was “almost instantaneously addictive”—“the most addictive drug known to man”—and passed along the tale of a 16-year-old girl who had recently tried smoking cocaine. “One night I noticed a big lump on my back,” she wrote. “I was rushed to the hospital and operated on and had two tumors removed. The tumors were caused by impurities in the coke which built up in my blood and got infected.” Such a story, if true, would have made medical history.

But for the media, drugs act as an anti-skeptic; the scarier the consequences, the bigger the story, the higher the ratings, and the lower the incentive to qualify extreme claims. The 1986 documentary *48 Hours on Crack Street* purported to show the crack menace spreading ineluctably to the middle class. It

drew one of the largest TV audiences ever for a news program.

Between 1981 and 1989, Straight opened sites in Atlanta; Cincinnati; Orlando; Boston; Detroit; Yorba Linda, California; and Springfield, Virginia. Former employees opened virtually identical programs in New Jersey, Kentucky, Utah, New Mexico, and Florida in the late '80s and early '90s.

Spanking and Motivating

As far back as 1978, however, employees had begun to quit Straight and contact regulators, reporting beatings and other maltreatment. "The program was getting...so bad that I felt it was hurting more kids than it was helping," one anonymous former staffer told the St. Petersburg Times that year. Miller Newton, Straight's national clinical director, admitted to authorities in 1982 that he had kept teenagers awake for 72-hour periods, put them on peanut butter-only diets, and forced them to crawl through each other's legs to be hit in a "spanking machine."

At Straight, The Seed's hand-waving procedure to get staff attention during group sessions mutated into "motivating," in which kids flapped their arms so vigorously it looked like they were trying to fly away. The movements were so violent that more than once teenagers hit those sitting next to them, resulting in broken bones.

Richard Bradbury, whose activism eventually helped shut Straight down, was forcibly enrolled in the program in 1983, when he was 17. His sister had had a drug problem, and Straight demanded that he be screened for one as well. After an eight-hour interrogation in a tiny room, Bradbury, who was not an addict, was nonetheless held. He later described beatings and continuous verbal assaults, which for him centered on sexual abuse he'd suffered as a young boy. Staffers and other participants called him a "faggot," told him he'd led his abusers on, and forced him to admit "his part" in the abuse.

Straight ultimately paid out millions of dollars in dozens of lawsuits related to abuse and even kidnapping and false imprisonment of adults. But the Straight network remained in operation until 1993. Even today, at least nine programs in the U.S. and Canada still use tactics, such as host homes and "motivating," that come directly from Straight. Some are run by former Straight employees, sometimes in former Straight buildings. Among them: SAFE in Orlando; Growing Together in Lake Worth, Florida; Kids Helping Kids in Cincinnati; the Phoenix Institute for Adolescents in Marietta, Georgia; Turnabout/Stillwater Academy in Salt Lake City; Pathway Family Center in Detroit; the Alberta Adolescent Recovery Center in Calgary, Alberta; and Love in Action, a program aimed at "curing" homosexual teenagers, located near Memphis. The Straight Foundation itself, which coordinated the organization and doled out the money, never died; it simply renamed itself the Drug Free America Foundation, which to this day works to promote student drug testing and to oppose efforts to end the drug war. Its website lists Mel Sembler and his wife Betty as "founding members."

Meanwhile, other organizations found they could profit from tough love with legal impunity. As negative publicity finally began to hurt Straight and skepticism about the drug war itself grew, other groups began to use similar tactics, all converging on a combination of rigid rules, total isolation of participants from both family and the outside world, constant emotional attacks, and physical punishments. These programs were sold as responses not just to drug use but to teenage "defiance," "disobedience," "inattention," and other real or imagined misbehavior.

Military-style "boot camps" came into vogue in the early '90s as an alternative to juvenile prison. The media spread fears of a new generation of violent teenaged "super-predators," and this solution gained political appeal across the spectrum. Liberals liked that it wasn't prison and usually meant a shorter sentence than conventional detention; conservatives liked the lower costs, military style, and tough discipline. Soon "hoods in the woods" programs, which took kids into the wilderness and used the harsh

environment, isolation, and spare rations to similar ends, also rose in popularity, as did “emotional growth” schools, which used isolation and Synanon-style confrontational groups.

Again, little evidence ever supported these programs. When the U.S. Department of Justice began studying the boot camps, it found that they were no more effective than juvenile prison. For a 1997 report to Congress, the department funded a review of the research, which found that the boot camps were ineffective and that there was little empirical support for wilderness programs. In late 2004 the National Institutes of Health released a state-of-the-science consensus statement on dealing with juvenile violence and delinquency. It said that programs that seek to change behavior through “fear and tough treatment appear ineffective.”

The Way of WWASP

But as the Martin Lee Anderson case makes clear, tough love continued to thrive. Indeed, the New York Times business section reported on tough teen programs as an investment opportunity last year, saying the number of teenagers attending residential programs to deal with drug and behavior problems had quadrupled since 1995. Exposés of programs like Straight or Florida’s government-run boot camps almost always include positive anecdotes along with the accounts of abuse. As a result, for parents terrified of drugs, these stories seem to portray the programs as the only ones tough enough to “do what works.” Since the media play positive anecdote against negative anecdote, often without citing the negative research data, exposés can actually serve as advertisements. The suggestion that the programs work serves to justify any abuse. In 2004, for example, Time quoted a father who said a tough-love program “improved his [son’s] attitude and sense of responsibility,” even as it reported that the family removed the child after finding some of the program’s disciplinary measures too harsh.

One of the largest chains of currently operating tough love schools is known as the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP), sometimes called the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools. Like Straight, it took tactics from Synanon; its ideology, the language it uses, and its methods for discrediting teens’ complaints are eerily similar.

Variouly claiming to hold 1,200 to 2,500 teenagers and reporting 2003 revenues of \$80 million, the group currently has at least eight affiliates, in Jamaica (Tranquility Bay), South Carolina (Carolina Springs Academy), Nevada (Horizon Academy), Utah (Cross Creek Programs, Majestic Ranch Academy), Georgia (Darrington Academy), Mississippi (Respect Camp), and Iowa (Midwest Academy). WWASP is a series of limited liability corporations that frequently switch corporate officers and names. This strategy is often used to limit losses from lawsuits by disgruntled customers, and until very recently, WWASP has been successful in deterring major law firms from pursuing such cases against it.

Through its public relations representative, James Wall of Freeman Wall Aiello, WWASP denies charges of abuse. But nine of its affiliates have closed following abuse allegations and government investigations. Mexico has shut down three programs since the late ’90s; at one, police shot video of teenagers held in outdoor dog cages. (That program currently faces a civil suit by a boy who claims he not only was kept in a dog cage but was sexually assaulted and forced to eat vomit.) In 1998 the U.S. State Department found “credible allegations of physical abuse” at WWASP’s facility in Samoa, citing “beatings, isolation, food and water deprivation, choke-holds, kicking, punching, bondage, spraying with chemical agents, forced medication, [and] verbal abuse.” It called for an investigation by the local government, which resulted in the program’s closure. The man who ran that program, who once admitted to 48 Hours that teens had been bound with duct tape at the Samoa site, now operates the WWASP facility in Iowa.

In 2003 Costa Rican child welfare authorities raided WWASP’s Dundee Ranch Academy. They found staff “unqualified to attend to needs of children,” “inadequate food and meal portions,” and “some

punishments [that] qualify as physical and psychological abuse.” The owner of the facility was arrested for human rights violations, and a source in the Costa Rican government says a prosecution is imminent. Yet Pillars of Hope Academy, an affiliated program for young adults run by Dundee Ranch’s owner, operates in the same building; it is not subject to Costa Rica’s regulations for programs aimed at minors.

Last year one WWASP program in upstate New York, the Academy at Ivy Ridge, was forced by the state attorney general to return nearly \$2 million for fraudulently claiming to offer New York high school diplomas. It says it is no longer affiliated with WWASP, but it has changed neither its staff nor its treatment methods. (It is currently facing a \$100 million class action suit for educational fraud.) Another WWASP affiliate, Spring Creek Lodge in Montana, likewise claims to be independent now, although it has the same staff and still gets referrals through the WWASP phone line and websites. In July a press release announced a new website, troubledteenprograms.org, linking all of the WWASP-associated programs under the name “Teen Revitalization.”

WWASP seems to have learned Straight’s P.R. lessons well: Deny abuse; smear kids who report problems as drug addicts, liars, and manipulators; insist that the media “balance” negative stories with positive anecdotes; and when the charges begin to stick and the press and regulators have thoroughly discredited a program, simply change its name and reopen, changing location only if necessary.

In an email message, James Wall, the WWASP publicist, says: “Clearly you can speculate about similarities between Straight and WWASPS. However, the two are completely separate organizations with no links whatsoever. You should also note that WWASPS and associated organizations continue to thrive (in terms of growth) despite continued attacks from individuals (online, etc.) and the media.”

WWASP seems to have learned from Straight’s political and regulatory strategies as well. Since the 2002 election, founder Robert Lichfield, his family members (some of whom run WWASP programs), and their various business entities have donated more than \$1 million to the Republican Party and its candidates. Together the Lichfields and their businesses are the third largest Republican donor in WWASP’s home state of Utah, according to the Deseret News. WWASP has moved to block or water down state legislation aimed at reigning in tough love programs in at least two states, Utah and Montana.

In 2004 Marty Stephens, speaker of the Utah House of Representatives, used a procedural maneuver to block a vote on legislation, which backers say had more than enough support to pass, imposing stricter controls on a WWASP facility near Randolph, Utah. Six days later, he received a check from Robert Lichfield for his gubernatorial campaign. Lichfield insisted to the Salt Lake Tribune that “that check had nothing to do with” the bill’s blockage. He added: “I’d like to use my means and resources to bless people’s lives. Does that also imply influencing policy makers to make good policies that support good family values, quality education, and the things I believe in? Definitely.”

Prior to 2005, Montana didn’t require teen programs to let the state know they existed, let alone impose regulation. But local and national exposés led to calls for greater oversight. In the 2005 legislative session, Spring Creek Lodge registered five lobbyists and spent at least \$50,000 to block a bill that would have imposed strict state rules, according to the Missoula Independent. The legislation died in the state House of Representatives. An alternative bill, sponsored by Spring Creek’s competitors, passed. It created a governor-appointed board with five members—three of whom represent the industry. One of the members is the “principal” of Spring Creek Lodge.

The Tide Turns?

Thanks to the potent combination of political influence, industry and government fear-mongering, and media malpractice, tough love has so far survived its detractors. But Martin Lee Anderson’s death may

have marked a turning point.

The case has revealed the politics of tough love in one of its home states, and has turned a new spotlight on the data. In a departure from the usual journalistic pattern, the early coverage of the case consistently cited the research finding boot camps to be no more effective than juvenile prison, and editorials mainly called for their closure.

The movement toward “evidence-based” social policy has been growing since the early ’90s, as insurers, patient advocates, and government agencies alike demanded proof that expensive policies produce demonstrable results. It also seems to have spurred at least some journalists to view scientific data as superior to anecdotes when assessing the performance of tough love programs. This has reduced the false balance in prior coverage that simply played success stories against abuse accounts. Some Florida papers even noted how the research and prior abuse scandals had led other states to shut down their government-run boot camps. They cited a Maryland scandal in which the Baltimore Sun photographed guards at a state-run boot camp openly beating inmates, which led that state to drop such programs. They also mentioned a similar scandal that prompted a federal investigation of Georgia’s public boot camp programs, leading to their closure. Some coverage of the Anderson case noted the 1999 death of 14-year-old Gina Score at a South Dakota boot camp following forced exercise similar to that endured by Anderson, an incident that led that state to shutter its programs.

As the Florida case unfolded, political missteps dogged boot camp supporters. First, the state refused to release the videotape of the boy’s beating to the media, leading to an outcry and greater media attention. Guy Tunnell, who had founded and staffed the sheriff’s boot camp in which Anderson died, had gone on to head the Florida Department of Law Enforcement; as a result, he was initially in charge of investigating the death. Email messages from Tunnell—who serves on the board of the Drug Free America Foundation—showed that he supported the boot camp he was supposed to be objectively investigating, and that he had adamantly resisted releasing the video. The revelations prompted the appointment of a special prosecutor, generating yet more media attention. No criminal charges have been filed so far, but Anderson’s family has filed a \$40 million lawsuit against the state.

Because Anderson was African-American, some activists raised the question of racism. (Most teens killed in these programs have been white, since blacks are less likely to be able to afford the private camps and more likely to be incarcerated instead of diverted to public boot camps.) On April 19, students occupied the governor’s office in an attempt to spur the arrest of the guards responsible for Anderson’s death. Two days later, more than 1,500 people attended a rally at the state Capitol in Tallahassee calling for the state to shut down its boot camps. (Full disclosure: I spoke there about the dangers of the tough love approach.) The event was also aimed at keeping pressure on prosecutors to indict the guards and the nurse who didn’t stop the beating. At the rally, two Florida legislators spoke in favor of legislation that would shut down the boot camps. Tunnell was forced to resign as head of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement after he mocked two men invited to speak at the rally, referring to Jesse Jackson as “Jesse James” and to Illinois Sen. Barack Obama (who ultimately did not attend the event) as “Osama bin Laden.”

This series of events has placed an unusual spotlight on tough love, connecting it not with rehabilitation but with death, cronyism, and bigotry. Previous deaths haven’t generated anywhere near as much activism.

To his credit, Jeb Bush recently signed into law a bill that shuts down the state’s youth boot camps. The replacement programs it creates are prohibited from using physical punishment or “harmful psychological intimidation techniques,” including humiliation and attempts to “psychologically break a child’s will.” But the kinder, gentler programs will still be run by the county sheriffs, and the regulations

(which are limited to Florida, of course) do not apply to the majority of programs, which are private. Right now, children sent to private tough love programs have fewer rights than convicted prisoners. A parent can send a child to a private program where he can be held incommunicado until he turns 18, without any medical diagnosis or rationale for the treatment and without any oversight or means of appeal.

In both public and private programs, policies on the use of force are far less stringent than they are for adult prisoners or psychiatric patients. At the government-run boot camp where Anderson died, for example, restraint, punches, and kicks were routinely applied to teens to punish them for not completing exercise, for “whimpering,” or for “breathing heavily.” Administrators who reviewed 180 “use of force” reports found inappropriate actions in only eight cases, even though most people would think that beating someone for “breathing heavily” is not acceptable. In a prison or mental hospital, by contrast, force is officially permitted only if the prisoner or patient is an immediate threat to himself or others. Parents who engaged in such practices could be charged with child abuse.

And the parents who send their kids to these camps? For the most part, they are uninformed about the absence of evidence supporting tough love programs and often desperate to save their kids from drugs and delinquency. Until we figure out a better balance between the right of parents to place their kids in whatever programs they choose and the right of kids to be free from inappropriate punishment by agents of their parents or the state, the abuse will continue. The shame of it all is that we know hurting kids doesn't help them.

Maia Szalavitz (maiasz@gmail.com) is the author of [Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids](#) (Riverhead).

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