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The Cult That Spawned the Tough-Love Teen Industry

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August 20" /> , 2007" />

The idea that punishment can be therapeutic is not unique to the Rotenberg Center. In fact, this notion is widespread among the hundreds of "emotional growth boarding schools," wilderness camps, and "tough love" antidrug programs that make up the billion-dollar teen residential treatment industry.

This harsh approach to helping troubled teens has a long and disturbing history. No fewer than 50 programs (though not the Rotenberg Center) can trace their treatment philosophy, directly or indirectly, to an antidrug cult called Synanon. Founded in 1958, Synanon sold itself as a cure for hardcore heroin addicts who could help each other by "breaking" new initiates with isolation, humiliation, hard labor, and sleep deprivation.

Today, troubled-teen programs use Synanon-like tactics, advertising themselves to parents as solutions for everything from poor study habits to substance misuse. However, there is little evidence that harsh behavior-modification techniques can solve these problems. Studies found that Synanon's "encounter groups" could produce lasting psychological harm and that only 10 to 15 percent of the addicts who participated in them recovered. And as the classic 1971 Stanford prison experiment demonstrated, creating situations in which the severe treatment of powerless people is rewarded inevitably yields abuse. This is especially true when punishment is viewed as a healing process. Synanon was discredited in the late 1970s and 1980s as its violent record was exposed. (The group is now remembered for an incident in which a member placed a live rattlesnake—rattle removed—in the mailbox of a lawyer who'd successfully sued it.) Yet by the time Synanon shut down in 1991, its model had already been widely copied.

In 1971, the federal government gave a grant to a Florida organization called The Seed, which applied Synanon's methods to teenagers, even those only suspected of trying drugs. In 1974, Congress opened an investigation into such behavior-modification programs, finding that The Seed had used methods "similar to the highly refined brainwashing techniques employed by the North Koreans."

The bad publicity led some supporters of The Seed to create a copycat organization under a different name. Straight Inc. was cofounded by Mel Sembler, a Bush family friend who would become the GOP's 2000 finance chair and who heads Lewis "Scooter" Libby's legal defense

fund. By the mid-'80s, Straight was operating in seven states. First Lady Nancy Reagan declared it her favorite antidrug program. As with The Seed, abuse was omnipresent—including beatings and kidnapping of adult participants. Facing seven-figure legal judgments, it closed in 1993.

But loopholes in state laws and a lack of federal oversight allowed shuttered programs to simply change their names and reopen, often with the same staff, in the same state—even in the same building. Straight spin-offs like the Pathway Family Center are still in business.

Confrontation and humiliation are also used by religious programs such as Escuela Caribe in the Dominican Republic and myriad "emotional growth boarding schools" affiliated with the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (wwasp), such as Tranquility Bay in Jamaica. wwasp's president told me that the organization "took a little bit of what Synanon [did]." Lobbying by well-connected supporters such as wwasp founder Robert Lichfield (who, like Sembler, is a fundraiser for Republican presidential aspirant Mitt Romney) has kept state regulators at bay and blocked federal regulation entirely.

By the '90s, tough love had spawned military-style boot camps and wilderness programs that thrust kids into extreme survival scenarios. At least three dozen teens have died in these programs, often because staff see medical complaints as malingering. This May, a 15-year-old boy died from a staph infection at a Colorado wilderness program. His family claims his pleas for help were ignored. In his final letter to his mother, he wrote, "They found my weakness and I want to go home."

* Has disavowed extreme and humiliating tactics

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