

SCIENTOLOGY AND THE STATE:
NARCONON'S INFLUENCE IN THE PRISON SYSTEM

by

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Abstract

Scientology has never been a stranger to controversy and now an alternative prison rehabilitation center based on Scientology drug treatment stirs concern with medical experts. The Second Chance Center is a small facility outside Albuquerque, N.M., which uses the Scientology-based drug treatment program called Narconon. It is the first prison-based rehabilitation center in America that was designed specifically to foster the Narconon system, and its founders hope that it will be the model for more centers around the country. The Narconon program, designed by Scientology founder, L. Ron Hubbard, uses a system of saunas, massages, organic diets, and behavior training classes intended to help drug addicted inmates kick their habits. But medical experts from several states are concerned that the federally funded program is ineffective and potentially dangerous.

Situated in the browning grass plains outside of Albuquerque, N.M., a perimeter of chain-linked fences and barbed wire surround a beige building with a dark blue door. The building itself is nothing special, it could be any number of anonymous structures orphaned in the New Mexico wasteland, but inside this structure is something out of the ordinary. The scenes unfold: A group of heavily tattooed Latino men lounge in a sauna, others snack on fresh vegetables and take small drinks of olive oil, some of the men administer deep tissue massages, and pairs are instructed to shout insults at their partner. This is the Second Chance Center, a controversial prison rehabilitation program housed in the former Westside Prison on the outskirts of the Albuquerque, N.M. Inmates at the Second Chance Center undertake a regimen of saunas, massages and vitamin treatment coupled with behavior modification activities to help these nonviolent offenders kick their drug habits. It is an unusual solution to the crisis of drug addiction in New Mexico prisons, but the Second Chance Center's seemingly innocent, spa-like treatments have come under scrutiny for the ideological foundations of driving the program: Scientology.

The Second Chance Center is the first prison-treatment facility of its kind in America that is specifically outfitted with the saunas and other hallmarks of Narconon, a Scientology-based drug treatment program. The program is partially funded with taxpayer money and the program's founders plan for it to become the model for prison-rehabs across the country. But some medical experts say that the Second Chance Center could be deadly. "I [am] worried that these treatments," Richard Pratt, health administrator for Arizona State Prison Complex Lewis says, "especially the sauna, could kill someone."

The Narconon treatment bases its methodology on practices derived from texts by L. Ron Hubbard, science fiction writer and founder of Scientology. Narconon itself began in 1966 when a former Arizona State Prison inmate named William Benitez founded the program after reading the works of L. Ron Hubbard. Benitez's program helped cure heroin addiction that afflicted his fellow inmates, according to Narconon's website. The program hinged on Hubbard's idea that toxins from pesticides and drugs are stored in the body's fatty tissue and can lead to relapses whenever the fat tissue is burned off. These chemicals, according to Hubbard, trigger drug-like responses in the addict's body, making it impossible to kick the habit. In order to remove these toxins, a system of vitamins, massages, and saunas are prescribed to release the toxic chemicals.

L. Ron Hubbard further developed the Narconon system to include his writings as a part of a behavioral modification facet of the program. These texts are among primary ideological ties to Scientology within Narconon, but the overt religious themes are absent from the texts. According to Narconon, the workbooks that they use are staunchly secular and tightly controlled. The texts are even copyrighted to keep individuals from starting a Narconon program without the approval of the Narconon International headquarters in Los Angeles.

"It's very decentralized," Cheryl Crawford from Narconon International said, "If an organization wants to become Narconon, they have to be accredited by us, then we will send them the texts by Hubbard."

Narconon has long faced criticism about Hubbard's biological theories due to his lack of any experience as a physician. Several American school systems, including ones in San Francisco, Boston, and Los Angeles, have even banned Narconon from their drug prevention programs. Since it opened in late 2006, the Second Chance Center has operated despite concerns regarding its efficacy by department of corrections, medical and psychiatric experts. Federal documents revealing contradictions in the program's medical methodology; and eyewitness accounts of Second Chance's procedural model that allege the system is inherently problematic and dangerous. In addition, few in the medical world have found that detoxification regimen of saunas and vitamin intake designed by L. Ron Hubbard has any scientific benefit at all, and some agree with Pratt's prognosis that use of saunas and vitamin cocktails can pose serious health problems, even death. But after a year and a half of media investigations and public outcry, Second Chance's doors are still open and inmates are still coming in.

Meet Kedric, Joseph, and Santana. They are all graduates of the Second Chance program with coming from diverse backgrounds and with different stories to tell. Kedric was arrested for 14 counts of burglary, Joseph was a meth dealer, and Santana trafficked drugs. On Second Chance's YouTube.com page, these former inmates talk about their time at the facility and the way it changed their lives. "I got my self-respect back," Kedric says in the video, "that portion we do, 'The Way to Happiness,' that's the truth. It really brought me happiness." The section of the program that Kedric speaks about is Hubbard's text, "The Way to Happiness," which is a central part of the Narconon procedure.

But unlike Kedric, other participants in Narconon programs did not have the success that former inmate mentions. For Kim Gawlick, her experience with a Narconon program similar to Second Chance drastically changed her life in a different way.

After struggling since her early teens with crippling addiction, Kim's options finally dried up. Heroin took complete control her life. She was no longer a casual user, or a simply a party girl, Kim was now a full blown an addict. Her family couldn't support her anymore, her legal problems became more complex, and her health was in serious jeopardy. She was slowly killing herself with drugs.

Gawlick, like so many addicts before her, ran the gamut of rehab centers and spent thousands of dollars trying to get back on track, but with little success. Finally, her family decided that she needed long-term help, but not just four-week, court ordered rehabs that she couldn't complete. Instead, the Gawlick family chose to send Kim, then 22 years-old, to a Narconon drug treatment program.

"I went online and found Narconon," Kim's mother Sue said, "at that point we were desperate." Gawlick then entered treatment at a facility called Vista Bay set in an idyllic setting in Northern California. There Gawlick underwent what on the surface sounds like a lavish vacation at a health spa: saunas, fresh food, and massages. But underneath the accoutrements of luxury was the rhetoric and recruitment efforts of Scientology.

"I knew it was connected with Scientology," Sue Gawlick said, "but at that time in our lives, and in her life, we were looking for anything that could help her. It was a big mistake."

Kim only lasted at the Scientology-based program for a month-and-a-half, when she became scared for her life. The spa-like saunas were actually six-hour sessions in a heated room, and the staff members required her to take huge amounts of niacin supplements, purportedly to clear drugs and pesticides from her system.

When the staff members told her about Scientology's belief in Thetans (human souls that ascend to Venus when they die) and urged to join the Church, Kim decided to escape from the facility by slipping away at night and hitchhiking to town with another patient. Her counselors tracked them down and kicked Kim out of the program without a refund.

"I've been through a lot of different programs, but this was the worst," Kim said. "They were sleaze-bags."

Narconon programs like the one Gawlick attended in Vista Bay operate in over 100 facilities around the world. But over a thousand miles away from Vista Bay, Second Chance is set in a much less idyllic location than the rolling hills of Northern California. Inside the Second Chance Center is a scene not unlike the one Kim Gawlick describes at her Narconon experience at Vista Bay. But instead of the bikini-clad young adults lounging in the wood walled-sauna, as Vista Bay's website portrays, mostly Latino inmates fill Second Chance's saunas. The patients administer tension release massages to each other in the sauna, which, according to Hubbard's texts, release toxins within the body. These massages, or "nerve assists," act as a centerpiece of the Narconon system alongside a diet of organic food, and behavior modification sessions using a Scientology modeled textbook.

The Second Chance center provides a much different mode of prison rehabilitation than the programs currently employed in other facilities around the country. One of the most distinguishing factors between Narconon and other rehabilitation methods is the absence of drug-replacement therapy. Other rehabilitation programs in prisons utilize drug-replacement therapy for inmates, wherein the patient is administered medication that blocks the effects of a drug or replaces it.

Doctors routinely prescribe Methadone, Naltrexone, or Buprenorphine as replacement drugs, which often exhibit some of the effects of opiates and can actually cause addiction to the replacement drugs themselves. According to Narconon's methodology, the use of drugs to eliminate addiction is ineffective, due to Hubbard's hypothesis that replacement drug would be stored within the fat tissue of the body. These replacement drugs then can trigger relapses when the fat tissue is burned off. It is the same theory, espoused by Hubbard, which drives the main rehab component of Narconon. Kristi Alley, actress and 20-year Scientology member, echoes the ideology of Narconon in Janet Reitman's Rolling Stone article, *Inside Scientology*, "I can get someone off heroin a hell of a lot faster than I can get somebody off a psych drug. The guy on heroin's not being told daily, 'This is what you need for your disease, and you're gonna have to take this the rest of your life.'"

Second Chance's story does not begin in New Mexico, but rather south of the border in Baja California, Mexico. In October 1995, former real-estate developer and construction company owner Rick Penderly retired from his consulting firm in California. He and his wife, Joy Westrum, then opened a Narconon-based facility within an

Ensenada prison located in Baja California. Pendery and Westrum both have long histories with Scientology and Pendery, whose interest for Narconon began in the 1970's, eventually served as the Director of Narconon Texas. He later became the Executive Director of Narconon's national branch.

Pendery's Second Chance Center in Esenada, was a Narconon certified facility partially funded with his own money as well as contributions from the Mexican government after failed numerous attempts to begin a program in the U.S.

The Ensenada program proved to be a success, according to studies by Mexican officials, and Pendery commissioned a second facility in Tijuana. In 2001, the Tijuana program opened adjacent to the main prison. It treated a select group of inmates using the crime and drug rehabilitation model licensed by Criminon International, which according to Cheryl Crawford of Narconon International, is nearly identical to Narconon. Criminon runs member-run rehab programs in 2,000 prisons around the world, according to their website.

To garner support for the facility, Pendery and Westrum, both high-ranking Scientologists according to Scientology newsletters dating back to 1980, coordinated fund-raising tours of their facility. In these tours, they introduced American legislators to an patient who had completed the program. They would also show the differences between the inmates in the Second Chance facility and the Tijuana compound.

One group that Pendery brought to the facility included the National Federation of Women Legislators (NFWL), which is tied to Scientology through its Treasurer Bruce Wiseman the US President of the Citizens Commission on Human Rights (CCHR). The CCHR is an organization created by Scientology to "investigate and expose psychiatric abuse and psychiatric violations of human rights" and it is bankrolled by the Church of Scientology. An anonymous donor fronted the money in 2002 for the NFWL to visit the Tijuana facility. The visitors included Republican state legislator Anna Crook from New Mexico. Crook saw promise in the program and attempted to secure funding for a Second Chance facility in her home state.

"If we can get [prisoners] off drugs, we can save a lot of taxpayer money in the long run," Crook said.

She told the *Santa Fe Reporter* in March 2007 that the average cost per day for an inmate was \$70 while Second Chance was only \$55 per day. Crook's first attempt to sway New Mexico's Department of Corrections failed, but she eventually secured \$375,000 grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a branch of the U.S. Department of Human Health Services.

In 2000, SAMHSA coordinated with President Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiative, making it the first agency in the Department of Human Health Services to specifically undertake the initiative. SAMHSA works with faith-based organizations to aid in "the identification and elimination of barriers to these groups' participation in SAMHSA opportunities."

Crook went on to unsuccessfully petition New Mexico's Legislative Finance Committee for the \$3.6 million request to expand the facility. Although she failed to gain the entire amount, she did persuade Governor Bill Richardson to secure \$375,000. Later, Richardson vetoed another \$425,000 that she had secured, which Crook believes to be simply an oversight.

"Sometimes you just don't recognize a good thing," Crook said, "I think that it was a mistake on his part."

Randy Suggs, a prominent businessman and Scientologist in Arizona, provided most of the remaining \$300,000 to start the program.

Suggs, a strong proponent of the program, also visited the Tijuana program with a group of prison administrators and Arizona legislators in 2001. Later in 2003, the *Associated Press* exposed that Suggs donated the money anonymously to bring the NFWL to the facility. The notion of a notable Scientologist funding the research into a Scientology-based rehab center brought the Mexican rehab center into the media eye, prompting several investigations by local television news stations that could not prove much other than the program's connection to Scientology.

But some of the administrators that accompanied Suggs to Tijuana did not share his optimism. When Suggs tried to promote the creation of a Second Chance facility in Arizona modeled on the prototype in Tijuana, he was denied by the Arizona Department of Corrections who determined that Second Chance would not be effective.

Richard Pratt, a health administrator at the Arizona State Prison- Complex Lewis, accompanied of the committee that visited the facility with Suggs and he wrote part of the analysis that resulted in the denial of funding to Suggs. "It was a real dog and pony show," Pratt said about the tour facility in Tijuana given by Rick Pendery. "I felt like I was at high school play; they brought us down there and it was show time." In operation and appearance, the Second Chance facility in Mexico--mostly funded by private sources--contrasted harshly to the Tijuana Prison. The conditions were substantially better, which Pratt speculates drew a large amount of volunteers for the study. According to a 2001 memorandum from the Deputy Directors Office of the Arizona State of Corrections, the Tijuana Prison was "in a state of severe disrepair, lacks the presence of modern equipment and security measures and exhibits extremely poor sanitary conditions."

The purported success of the Second Chance program focuses almost entirely on the outcome of a study by the Autonomous University of Baja California of the prototype facilities in Mexico. The program in Tijuana boasted that only 10 percent of its inmates returned to prison after completing the program. The claims that percent of those who finished the program in Tijuana were not incarcerated again, contrast with U.S. Department of Justice national average of a 40 percent success rate. But Pratt wasn't buying what Pendery was selling.

Pratt was highly skeptical of the high success rate due to the haphazard conditions at the facility as well as its lack of accurate data gathering methods. "There were a lot of things that could have lead to those results," Pratt said. "One was that the prison was a mess, none of the guards or prisoners had uniforms, and no one really knew how long they were in for. It was impossible to accurately track anyone."

The very study that Pendery uses as evidence pointing to the program's effectiveness—Autonomous University of Baja California-authored research—also states that the information had flaws: "Due to inmate overpopulation, it was not possible to classify [prisoners] according to their sentences, type of crime, and degree of liability; dangerous murderers were found next to simple thieves or those imprisoned for very minor offenses." This data did not correspond to the anticipated recidivism rates of Second Chance in New Mexico, according to Pratt, because they only admit a very specific population of inmates. In addition, many prisons only determine their recidivism rates by tracking criminals who return to their own prison. This does not account for criminals who cross the border or who are imprisoned in another facility, said Pratt.

"Given the reputation of that prison system, I wouldn't be too impressed with having them be for it," said Bianca Martinez, PhD., the Bureau Chief of Mental Health of the New Mexico Department of Corrections about the Tijuana study.

Martinez also doubted the ability of the NFLW members to actually make decisions about what would be medically appropriate for the American prison system. Anna Crook had no medical experience and according to Martinez, she was taken in by the Second Chance spectacle.

"[Some of the legislators] were elderly ladies with families with substance abuse problems," Martinez said. " So they thought, 'We have so many problems with our system, so let's try anything.' They thought that it seemed to work in Mexico, and since we have a lot of Hispanics, it should work here. Of course, that was a bunch of BS."

The success of the Tijuana program, the Baja University study concluded, was that the sauna method created lasting positive change in the patients. Some physicians saw the sauna as holistic approach to drug treatment. In a study on Second Chance's methodology by Alfonso Paredes, MD, Professor of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Science Emeritus at University of California, Los Angeles, he states that the sauna detoxification portion is "a procedure that has been used by Native Mexicans as well as other American indigenous groups and various Nordic cultural groups."

But Pratt and other medical experts saw potential dangers inherent in the Narconon program in Tijuana. Pratt's observations contrasted with the stories that Crook and the NFWL brought back to the U.S. "At the center they had a trailer where the inmates could self-administer their vitamins, and the inmates were giving each other massages in the sauna," Pratt said.

"It seemed like a much better place to be than the other prison, so it was no surprise that the inmates wanted to be in there. But the problem was that there was very little supervision and I wondered if [the inmates] were medically screened before going in."

Martinez also expressed her concern for inmates with pre-existing medical conditions. "You can end up with a lot problems with liver damage, especially if you're already a drug addict," Martinez said. "Also with all that sweating you can cause dehydration. It can cause cardiac abnormalities and cardiac rhythms to go off."

Martinez's concerns became a reality at the Second Chance Center in New Mexico. In August 2007, retired boxer Johnny Tapia left the Second Chance Center after experiencing health problems in the sauna, according to *The Albuquerque Tribune*. Tapia had voluntarily committed himself to the Second Chance center in May, after pleading guilty to a felony drug possession charge two months earlier. But he then left the facility because he could not use the sauna. His wife Teresa said Tapia could not breathe inside the sauna, according to *The Albuquerque Tribune* and his health problems prohibited him from getting in the vitamin B injections that are integral to the Narconon treatment.

Kim Galwick did not suffer the same health problems that Tapia underwent in the sauna, but she says that she witnessed harsh treatment of the people involved in the "purification process."

"They send you into a sauna for 30 whole days," Galwick said. "You sit in there for 6 hours a day and you have to have some major excuse if you're not going to go. There was one guy who was HIV+ and they just took him to another sauna off-site."

Health hazards aside, the actual practices of the Second Chance Center came under scrutiny in a May 2007, when New Mexico Department of Corrections Secretary Joe R. Williams presented his department's study to the Legislative Finance Committee entitled, "The Review of Facility Planning Efforts and Oversight of Private Prisons and Health Programs" that looked at the overall standing of New Mexico treatment facilities.

The study cast doubt on rehab facilities like Second Chance that mix religious treatment with secular treatment.

"Combination treatments have not been fully evaluated and that many combinations may result in watered down components, leading to less effective treatment. For example, 12-step programs are spiritually-based and rely on nonprofessionals and recovering addicts for service therapy and support, which is different from professional therapy," the study stated.

Kim Gawlick noticed this practice of using "nonprofessionals and recovering addicts for service therapy and support." At the Vista Bay program, the Narconon participants would stay at the facility long after their treatment had ended to train others in Narconon techniques. Staff members often petitioned these participants to become peer mentors to others in the program, and according to Gawlick many stayed because they didn't want to face the world outside the center, or sometimes they would have already started the process of becoming a Scientologist.

At Second Chance, many of the stars of their YouTube.com videos went on to become peer counselors. "These were the people who really pushed Scientology onto you," Gawlick said. Many of Second Chance's supporters like Pendery and Suggs firmly assert that the program has little to do with Scientology. Joy Westrum, who did not return phone calls, told the *Santa Fe Reporter* in March 2007 that the program was based solely on Hubbard's secular texts.

One of the main texts used in the program is Hubbard's "The Way to Happiness." Scientology volunteers at catastrophic sites commonly hand out this book. At Ground Zero, the Virginia Tech campus, and New Orleans, Scientology volunteers performed free "nerve assists" to victims, while giving out Hubbard's text.

Although Westrum says the program's workbooks are secular, Kim Gawlick experienced a different side to Narconon at Vista Bay. "After a month of saunas and being pumped full of niacin," Gawlick said, "then they started getting into the behavioral changes workbooks. Then you started to hear things down the line that you were going to hear about, like the aliens and some kinds of other worldly things, and that was a major red flag."

Pratt and other physicians agree with Gawlick, but for reasons more dangerous than aliens. "With all the cutbacks in funding," Pratt said, "a lot of prisons are definitely drawing straws for whoever can put up the money. I worry that prison officials will pick up a dangerous program like this one." A 2004 study by the U.S. Department of Justice estimated that 53 per cent of all prisoners in federal prisons are dependant on drugs.

With over 2.2 million people in jail and prison in 2006, and the numbers of prisoners increasing every year, the federal government will need to consider the implicit question underscoring the adoption of more facilities like Second Chance: Is it more important to save taxpayer money, or save inmates lives?

Scientology and the Internet

As the Church of Scientology is under attack by conspiracy theorists, citizen journalists and even hackers on the internet, the Church has fought back with a complex public relations campaign. The Church fights for its reputation online, where scores of critical websites flourish and bulletin boards exist for casual Scientology critics to voice their dislike for the Church. In chat rooms of Scientology watchdog groups such as Operation Clambake and Kristi Wachter's webpage, Truth About Scientology, the internet enables organizing against Scientology to become a pastime for many citizen journalists. Yet, as videos of Tom Cruise espousing Scientology's "trade secrets" on Youtube.com and testimonials of ex-members appear online, the Church of Scientology has gone on the offensive against its malcontents. The Church has sued many sites that post their materials online, alleging copyright infringement.

In order to combat the negative information, The Church has also created counter sites designed in a way that will appear more readily in a Google search than any negative press. Press Direct International appears to be a news aggregator with headlines from the AP, Reuters and other media sources, but in reality it is a place to post press releases from organizations connected with Scientology. On the bio page, the site's editor-in-chief, Kris Nickerson, claims to provide "access to our site to news sources for distribution of information including articles, editorial content, and press release distribution." Among the articles are six about The Second Chance Center with headlines claiming: "Joy Westrum Stemming Tide of Recidivism with Innovative Prisoner," and "Second Chance Program Raising Self-Respect in New Mexico Inmates."

These articles, either authored or posted by Nickerson, who is a Scientologist, were then reposted throughout the internet onto free content sites thereby creating a higher search engine ranking for the term "Second Chance Center."

The Second Chance Center has also dealt with the negative press in a similar manner by buying domain names such as penalrehab.com and alternative-sentencing.com that point back to the Second Chance Center. Many of these sites also will refer the visitor to Second Chance Successes blog, where purported graduates of the program write about the program. They also created the "Second Chance News Channel" on YouTube.com, which disseminates video testimonials created by Second Chance that highlight graduates of the program. By creating these pages, the search for information about the organization is obfuscated by these "Trojan horse" sites.

This tactic of inundating the web with Scientology press releases that appear to be articles, is not the only means by which the Church tries to control information. In an even bolder move, the Church of Scientology buys websites or domain names from organizations critical of Scientology. One of the most notable is the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), which—according to a 1997 *Washington Post* article—began in 1986 as a hotline for people concerned that a family member was involved with a cult. According to the *Post* article, many callers asked about Scientology. Eventually Church of Scientology lawyers sued the organization repeatedly forcing it into bankruptcy in 1995. A Scientologist then bought the rights to use the name CAN and their logo for the purposes of "promoting religious freedom."

Second Chance Center Time Line

October 1995: Second Chance facility in Ensenada Prison

2001: Second Chance program opens in Tijuana

2002: Legislators brought down to promote program

2004: \$350,000 secured for New Mexico program from federal government

September 2006: Second Chance Center opens in Albuquerque

May 2007: Johnny Tapia admitted to the facility

August 2007: Tapia leaves the facility

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