

Experience Summary: 2012-2023

Open Sky, the wilderness camp I was sent to in 2012, was an ideological descendant of Synanon — one of the most dangerous cults in American history. My experience there involved abduction (called “gooning”), deprivation, isolation, solitary confinement (called “solos”), forced medication, group shaming exercises, coerced confessions, forced physical exertion while sick, threats, and induced physical and emotional breakdowns under the guise of “growth.” There was no formal diagnosis or evaluation required to be sent there. Open Sky shut down in 2024 as the troubled teen industry came under public scrutiny with countless survivors speaking out.

CJ, a so-called life coach, who stated he was involved in sending me to Open Sky, was later positioned in my life to provide “treatment” in Beaufort, SC. He presented himself as practicing therapy but was not acting as a licensed therapist. He operated using many of the same tactics and belief system as Open Sky, effectively continuing the post-Synanon/troubled teen industry framework in a different setting. What started as biweekly sessions escalated into what he called a “program.”

While in his “program,” I experienced:

- Emotional and physical exhaustion from mandatory daily sessions framed as “healing”
- Repeated pressure to process trauma through a prescribed narrative and to confess
- Regular threats of institutionalization, disguised as “more treatment” if I failed to comply
- Financial coercion, with support tied to compliance
- Engineered isolation, both social and logistical
- Constant monitoring, often through multiple actors
- Enforced and monitored daily routines
- Extreme boundary violations, including being pressured to care for him during his medical recovery
- Psychiatric coercion, including pressure to take heavy medications — without cause and without medical authority

I was transported to Open Sky in 2012, and did not fully escape CJ’s control until 2023. This resulted in nearly 11 years of sustained control and coercion, with only a brief break between wilderness and CJ’s direct involvement.

Cult Lineage

Synanon (1958–1991): A violent California cult that began as a drug rehab and evolved into an authoritarian commune known for forced confessions, shaved heads, child abuse, and physical assaults. Developed the original attack therapy model called “the game.”

CEDU Educational Services (1967–2005): Founded by Synanon follower Mel Wasserman. CEDU carried forward Synanon’s attack therapy model through “emotional growth” boarding schools notorious for psychological abuse, isolation, and coerced confessions.

Aspen Education Group (Founded 1997): Absorbed CEDU staff and practices following CEDU’s collapse, continuing the same Synanon-based model across new programs. Many programs shut down due to allegations of abuse.

Open Sky (2006–2024): Founded by former Aspen staff Aaron Fernandes, Emily D. Fernandes, and Danny Frazer. It replicated the Aspen/CEDU model but with a “holistic” marketing edge. Shut down in 2024 amid growing public scrutiny.

Sources & Resources

Articles

1. *Teen Vogue – How Synanon Inspired Abusive Teen Rehabilitation Methods Still Used Today*

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/this-1970s-cult-inspired-abusive-teen-rehabilitation-methods-still-used-today>

2. *Unsilenced – Timeline of CEDU Educational Services, Inc.*

<https://www.unsilenced.org/timeline/cedu-educational-services-inc/>

3. *Unsilenced – Timeline of Aspen Education Group*

<https://www.unsilenced.org/timeline/aspen-education-group/>

4. *The Story Behind Mount Bachelor Academy's Closure – Oregon Archive*

<https://www.oregonarchive.org/the-story-behind-mount-bachelor-academys-closure/>

5. *Breaking Code Silence – Open Sky Wilderness Therapy*

<https://www.breakingcodesilence.org/open-sky-wilderness-therapy>

6. *Open Sky – Founding Team*

<https://www.openskywilderness.com/founding-team/>

7. *The Guardian* – “*The wilderness ‘therapy’ that teens say feels like abuse*”

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/nov/14/us-wilderness-therapy-camps-troubled-teen-industry-abuse>

Documentaries

1. *The Program: Cons, Cults, and Kidnapping* (Netflix)
2. *Hell Camp: Teen Nightmare* (Netflix)
3. *The Synanon Fix: Did the Cure Become a Cult?* (HBO Max)

Books

1. *Help at Any Cost* - Maia Szalavitz

Survivor Resources

1. unsilenced.org
2. breakingcodesilence.org
3. Reddit: [r/troubledteens](https://www.reddit.com/r/troubledteens)

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