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# *Msgr. William O'Brien, 90, Dies; Innovator in Treating Drug Abuse*

By **Paul Vitello**

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Msgr. William B. O'Brien, a co-founder of Daytop Village, one of the first and most successful residential drug and alcohol treatment programs in the United States, died on Oct. 19 in Scarsdale, N.Y. He was 90.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York announced his death.

Monsignor O'Brien opened the first Daytop treatment residence in 1963 on Staten Island with three partners: Dr. Daniel H. Casriel, a psychiatrist; Joseph Shelly, the chief probation officer of the criminal court in Brooklyn; and Alexander Bassin, a social worker and criminologist.

Over the next two decades the program grew into a national franchise, with 28 facilities in five states, and became a model for substance abuse treatment centers around the world. Daytop officials say its centers have treated more than 200,000 people in the United States alone, achieving a long-term sobriety success rate of over 80 percent.

Tall and dapper — he favored well-made suits and snap-brim caps and called his clerical garb “my monkey suit” — Monsignor O'Brien became something of a celebrity through Daytop, which is not affiliated with the Catholic Church. He was courted by politicians, invited to brief Pope John Paul II about substance abuse and featured on broadcast news shows like ABC's “20/20,” which called him “one of the world's recognized experts in rehabilitating drug addicts” in a 1990 report.

At the invitation of public health officials, he helped set up programs similar to Daytop in 66 countries and was one of the founders of the World Federation of Therapeutic Communities by the time he retired in 2010.

Monsignor O'Brien leveraged the publicity to become a powerful advocate of treatment programs and one of the fiercest critics of the so-called war on drugs. He testified frequently at legislative hearings in state capitals and in Washington, and could be stinging in his criticism of government officials for building more prisons while cutting funding for drug treatment.

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“We’re in a fortress mode, building more and more prisons to handle the drug problem,” he said in a 1996 interview with *America*, a public policy magazine published by the Jesuit order of priests. “The American people are on a high. They think that law enforcement can solve a major social problem like drug abuse, and politicians are following suit, insulating the public from the truth — that American society is in trouble — to make them feel good with simplistic solutions.”

In 1993 he published “You Can’t Do It Alone: The Daytop Way to Make Your Child Drug Free,” a book written with Ellis Henican, a columnist for *Newsday*. It credits the program’s success partly to its celebrity financial backers, including Shirley MacLaine, Mary Tyler Moore, Tony Orlando and Roger Staubach.

William Bastable O’Brien was born in Yonkers on Sept. 28, 1924, and grew up nearby in Tuckahoe, N.Y. His father, William Carroll O’Brien, was a bank vice president; his mother, Margaret Mary Tully O’Brien, a homemaker. He was ordained in 1951 after graduating from St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers and was assigned to St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan.

He was later assigned to St. Brendan’s Church in the northwest Bronx, where he remained pastor after becoming involved with Daytop. He received a graduate degree in psychotherapy from the University of Illinois in 1966. At his death he lived at the St. Pius X Church rectory in Scarsdale. There are no known survivors.

Monsignor O’Brien first became aware of the magnitude of the drug problem while serving at St. Patrick’s, where he discovered that many mothers were coming from all parts of the city to pray for children who were in trouble with drugs. A meeting in 1957 with the mother of a baby-faced, drug-addled boy who had become involved in a murder in Washington Heights in Manhattan prompted him to begin planning a treatment center, he later told interviewers.

His treatment model was inspired by Synanon, a therapeutic community for drug and alcohol abusers founded in California in 1958. (It disbanded in 1989.) Monsignor O’Brien — Father O’Brien then — was visiting a Synanon community in Westport, Conn., shopping for treatment strategies when he met Dr. Casriel, who was visiting for the same reason.

The two eventually teamed with Mr. Bassin and Mr. Shelly, who had obtained a \$390,000 grant from the National Institute of Mental Health in 1963 to start an experimental outpatient substance-abuse center on Staten Island for 22 male probationers. It was called Daytop Lodge.

Father O’Brien began spending time there as a counselor and lent a hand in defusing neighborhood opposition to the presence of men who were considered ex-convicts. When the center was incorporated as Daytop Village the next year, Father O’Brien became its first chairman. Daytop stands for Drug Addiction Yields to Persuasion.

The Daytop approach was rigorous. Residents were expected to obey strict rules and attend daily group therapy sessions that often became confrontational. Penalties included wearing a sign detailing the transgression and cleaning bathrooms.

Monsignor O'Brien described the strategy as "a very tough love, not a sympathetic love," designed to make addicts ultimately take responsibility for themselves. (With the exception of probationers, most residents were free to leave at any time.)

In a period when virtually the only options available to addicts seeking treatment were locked hospital wards and prison cells, Daytop was considered revolutionary, and its treatment model became widely imitated — so much so that it began losing clients to competitors and running budget deficits in the late 1990s.

In 2012, two years after Monsignor O'Brien retired, the organization filed for Chapter 11 protection. Daytop emerged from bankruptcy the next year and is negotiating a merger with Samaritan Village, a treatment network based largely on the Daytop model.

Monsignor O'Brien was straightforward in assessing his work. "It's been a very rewarding life," he told The New York Post in 2009. "Bringing the young ones back from the brink of destruction."

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