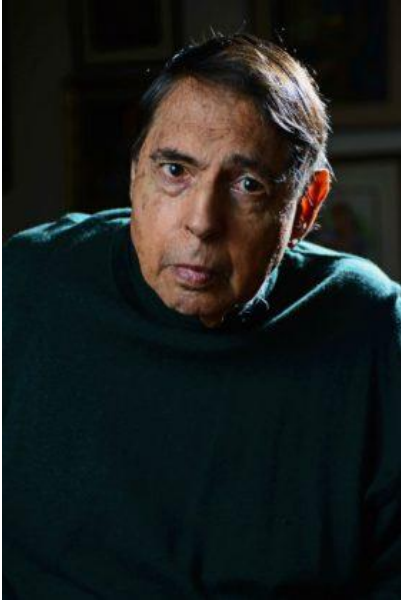


The Snake, The Cult and The NASA Rover

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Photos by Rich Schmitt/ Staff
Photographer

The Technicolor World of Paul Morantz

By MARIE TABELA | *Special to the Palisadian-Post*

On display in a home tucked away in Rustic Canyon is an unusual wall decoration: a nearly five-foot-long replica of a rattlesnake that was once deployed as a murder weapon. It was handmade by one of the members of the very cult who concocted the plan.

The real thing nearly killed its host, civil rights attorney Paul Morantz.

And today, sadly, that injury may be catching up with him, proving to be a mortal wound.

All along Morantz knew that, as a fierce critic of the more dangerous cults that followed the Age of Aquarius, he had made enemies. But, as a self-described “wise ass who got in over his head,” he did not expect them to retaliate so brutally.

He told the *Palisadian-Post* how, on a bright October afternoon in 1978, he had arrived at his home in Pacific Palisades and, without thinking, plunged his hand into his mailbox ... only to be attacked by a venomous pit viper rising up to sink its fangs into his flesh. Its rattle had been removed to silence the deadly reptile.

“It was like having my hand trapped in a vice and it kept on tightening,” he said after firefighters decapitated the reptile.

The 33-year-old attorney had just won a \$300,000 judgment against Synanon, a former drug rehab program that had metastasized into a “church” whose members were kept in line with “truth-telling games” and the paramilitary Imperial Marines. He had accused them of kidnapping a young woman who later thanked him for saving her life and preventing her from “becoming one of them.”

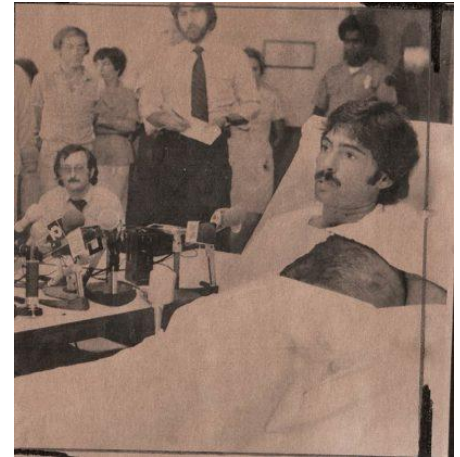
The snake had been unleashed by a pair of so-called “Marines,” including the son of band leader Stan Kenton, whose distinctive green Plymouth spotted in the Palisades led to their arrest—and the cult’s implosion.

Forty years later, sitting in his shadowy living room, Morantz does not like to dwell on his long recovery. But he still feels it was a worthwhile victory over one of many such groups who believed they were waging a holy war.

Surrounded by mementos of an extraordinary life, walls covered with Disney film cells and Golden Age Hollywood beauties, as well as an amazing array of tributes to his personal hero Davy Crockett, Morantz spoke in hushed tones about evil men.

A West Los Angeles native, he served in the U.S. Army as a reservist in 1963.

He attended USC where he became sports editor for the school newspaper *The Daily Trojan* and earned his law degree at USC Law. This was where his lifelong love of journalism began, although, to eat, he turned to law.



*Morantz after the reptile attack
Photo courtesy of Paul Morantz*

He joined the public defender's office where he became fascinated by criminal conspiracies.

His first big win came in 1974 when he exposed the plight of T. B. Renfroe, a Skid Row alcoholic who had been held captive in a Burbank nursing home called Golden State Manor.

It was the heart of a nasty racket where homeless people convicted of public drunkenness would be informed they had to check into the Manor and similar institutions to avoid further jail time.



A deadly symbol

They would be subdued with massive doses of Thorazine while the “dog catchers” and the homes would share fraudulent bounty from the state.

“The [homeless] were the best victims and the [nursing homes] never in their wildest dreams thought it could be a nightmare. But I was going to be that nightmare,” Morantz said, his voice lifting. “I was going to bring them down.”

After freeing Renfroe, Morantz found seven more patients held against their will.

And so, began his career of championing those who had no way of saving themselves.

Three years later he was deeply entrenched in the war of his life with Synanon.

There were many victims of brutal violence at the hands of Synanon and the cult's megalomaniacal founder Charles Dederich, who may have started with the best intentions but ended up running a "training camp" in which beatings were a regular attraction. He would die a broken man in 1997, his original good intentions long spent.

One of the snake handlers, a Vietnam vet who boasted of his necklace made of severed ears, was murdered by a rival drug dealer.

His accomplice, Lance Kenton, who was sentenced to a year in jail, has since worked for Charlie Sheen who loved his stories of cult life.

Synanon did not take kindly to Morantz, and for more reasons than him once throwing a water balloon at a Californian Congressman and Synanon supporter who was riding proudly in the Pacific Palisades Fourth of July Parade.

Perhaps, for Morantz, the worst loss from this turbulent era was his relationship with Trudy, a woman he called the love of his life.

She had two daughters and, like most of us, could not cope with such stress and violence.

Would he have changed any of this?

He smiles: "No, otherwise Curiosity might have crashed."

He is speaking proudly of the accomplishments of his only child, Chaz, an engineer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena who helped build Curiosity, which, even now, explores the rugged surface of Mars.

Morantz is not short of his own style of accomplishments.

He is the reason that a therapist is prohibited from engaging in a sexual relationship with a client when that patient is in their care and for two years afterward.

It is because of his investigations that "brainwashing" is accepted as a legitimate legal defense.

He is the reason why Californians have the right to sue churches for punitive damages.

He is one reason why there are laws keeping sexual abusers away from private schools.

That came from his case against Dr. John Gottuso, a therapist who sexually manipulated five students and six adults from a privileged post within a private grade school in Arcadia. The cult was called The Fellowship.

He has taken on an amazing array of powerful spiritual and self-help movements with equally Technicolor names, including The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, the People's Temple, est, the Moonies, Rajneeshpuram and the Church of Scientology.

So, who is the biggest enemy today? Who is still brainwashing kids?

He said it's political.

"Some time ago I would have said ISIS, but today I would say Russia and North Korea," Morantz explained. "In North Korea you have kids being brought up on video games where the goal is to shoot Americans, and you have a society that you know if you go against negativity you could get attacked.

"The way children are brought up in Russia and North Korea is what makes them so much more dangerous than other [threats]."

He draws a parallel between North Korea and the cults he has investigated—they all are rooted in fear of a charismatic leader.

"When you see that fanatical cheering, what they are really saying is, 'I love you, don't kill me.'"

He has lived his life following Crocket's mantra: "Be always sure you are right, then go ahead." It is a message carried through his page-turner chronicle of his legal career "Escape: My Lifelong War Against Cults."



At home with his beauties

But, as he backs into his 70s, he may be about to reach a wider audience.

He has agreed to a multi-part television series on his life to be made by Robert Port, who in 2003 won the Best Documentary Short Subject Oscar for directing "Twin Towers."

That doco followed firefighter and police officer brothers during 9/11.

It will also be produced by Jerry Offsay, Port's neighbor and former programming chief executive at *Showtime*.

He would like to be played by Emile Hirsch, the lead in Sean Penn's remarkable true-life movie "Into the Wild."

Over the years Morantz has battled many monsters, not always winning but always striking a blow for the vulnerable over the predatory. But it has taken its toll.

He suspects that some of his current ill health, which leaves him with a hushed voice, may date back to that snake attack.

But, in the end it was Morantz and not the snake, nor Synanon and its malicious ilk, who has survived and who has carried the torch of free thought and human dignity into the future.

We all owe Paul Morantz a massive debt.