

The Storm's Quiet Eye

How cool, calm and emotionally brilliant Brentwood psychotherapist-entrepreneur George Anderson built an empire from L.A.'s limitless supply of hotheads

By Andy Meisler, Los Angeles Times – 8/28/05



John Elder, perhaps as well as anyone, has a handle on the whole amazing success story. Several years ago he was teaching anger management at the Richstone Family Center, a nonprofit facility in Hawthorne, when he noticed a curious phenomenon.

"We used to get most of our clients from court referrals, but suddenly the numbers started to dwindle, as if someone had closed a door," says Elder, who has a master's degree in psychology and works part time in that field. A brief investigation revealed that local court referrals were only going to facilities and facilitators certified by Anderson & Anderson, a Brentwood-based organization run by a psychotherapist named George Anderson.

"I was moderately angry, so I went over to his office to meet this George Anderson," he says, noting that he took one of Anderson's training classes. "Well, George had me disarmed within 90 minutes. We ended up having lunch together, and I ended up working for him. And I really enjoy it. George is, quite simply, an emotional genius."

Anderson also is quite a businessman. He sells an elixir for something Los Angeles produces in abundance: namely, rage, frustration, aggression, revenge and self-destruction. No conclusive scientific data exists to show that Angelenos are angrier than

their fellow Americans, but consider the anecdotal evidence. This is where the CEO of the Happiest Corporation on Earth said of a subordinate, "I think I hate the little midget"; a Ventura County man was charged with felony vandalism earlier this month after he shot at a car to shut off its alarm; and a recent community meeting debating the issue "Blacks and Hispanics: Allies or Rivals?" voted noisily—and angrily—for the latter.

Anderson has practically cornered the market on anger management training in Southern California, establishing himself as the dead-calm center of a swirling world of volatile hotheads, sputtering short-fusers, temperamental teeth-clenchers—the whole menagerie of people whose outbursts often bring them, eventually, into a rational and lucrative world Anderson helped create.

Which makes him, perhaps, the least angry man in Los Angeles.

Only an ostrich without cable or internet access can have failed to notice the rise of road rage, freeway shootings, bitter lawsuits and just plain nastiness hereabouts. It takes a bit more digging to realize just how well Anderson, who has come a long way from his middle-class boyhood in the Deep South, has anticipated, met, made money from and—depending on your point of view—helped to ameliorate this dispiriting trend.

"Can you imagine how much business we get just from what happens every day on the 405 Freeway?" Anderson says, shaking his head. He adds that these days flagrant tailgaters, fist-shakers and bird-flippers often get mandatory anger management courses added to their fines and insurance rate hikes.

Anderson—even his generic-sounding name is a virtual nonaggression pact—is a lanky 67-year-old man with a slight paunch and smooth skin the color of toffee squares. He has a shy, gap-toothed smile, alert but slightly droop-lidded eyes, a head of short graying hair receding slightly from his forehead and crown, a matching salt-and-pepper mustache and a large, roundish nose that's quirkily nonthreatening, like a small dab of cookie dough. Most days he's dressed in soft khaki pants, a soft button-down shirt, and loafers. No tie. His overall mien of preppy, intelligent affability has prompted many friends and acquaintances to say he reminds them of the TV sitcom character Cliff Huxtable.

In an era in which many psychiatrists, psychologists and couch-committed psychoanalysts are being financially squeezed by managed-care paperwork and shrinking reimbursements, Anderson is prospering in a reinvented business fueled by a court-ordered clientele that's compelled to pay for anger management services from their own pockets. Anderson & Anderson—which has four full-time employees, including Anderson—grossed more than \$800,000 last year. George Anderson has neither an M.D. or PhD degree and rarely sees patients or leads group sessions.

For the past few years, Anderson & Anderson has enjoyed an ironclad but completely unofficial, even somewhat mythical, connection to the Los Angeles County court system. The reason for this will be explained—at least partially—later; suffice it for now to know that visitors to local courthouses who ask for names of certified anger management programs are almost invariably directed to Anderson & Anderson or to independent Anderson & Anderson-trained practitioners.

Nobody's counting, but courts all over the country are referring thousands of defendants convicted of low-grade offenses

(such as simple assault or resisting arrest) to classes of varying length in either anger management or domestic violence prevention as a condition of their probation. (John Elder explains: "A man comes home and finds his wife in bed with another guy. He hits the guy, that's anger management. He hits his wife, that's domestic violence.") Anger management also is taught in prisons to inmates hoping to qualify for early parole.

Around Los Angeles, at least, most therapists who want to get into the anger management game get Anderson & Anderson training and certification. It costs \$250 per day for a five-day live course, or \$599 for the CD home-study option. Certified practitioners must purchase all their workbooks and other teaching materials from Anderson & Anderson. They also must attend 16 hours of maintenance training each year, and be recertified by Anderson & Anderson every two years.

What those therapists ultimately charge their clients is their own business.

Although Anderson has a busy branch office in Lawndale, his mainstay is training A&A-certified practitioners—in venues as close as Santa Monica and as far away as Arkansas, Florida, Guam, Great Britain and the Philippines. He estimates that he and Anderson & Anderson-certified trainers have turned out more than 8,000 anger management practitioners thus far. Many of these are therapists who offer anger management as part of their private practices. Others are embedded in prime anger hot spots: They're human resource managers, school counselors and psychologists, clergy and parole officers. Lately, Anderson has reduced his role as chief trainer and devoted his time to providing one-on-one anger management training to business owners, lawyers and doctors, government officials and college faculty members who often take the training at the request of superiors presenting it under the stealth rubric of "executive coaching." He charges \$250 per hour.

Last December, Anderson & Anderson signed a contract with—wait for it—the United States Postal Service, under which the USPS will use the Anderson & Anderson anger management curriculum and workbooks and pay Anderson & Anderson \$31.50 for each postal employee thus trained. It's worth noting that the postal service has more than 700,000 career employees.

The specific details of how George Anderson became the center of the anger management world in Los Angeles suggest that being an emotional genius isn't even his most remarkable talent.

Anderson was born and raised in Jackson, Miss., the son of a contractor who specialized in building churches. In 1957, during his freshman year at Jackson State University, he was nearly expelled; he had participated "in a leadership role" in a classroom boycott protesting the actions of a governor he felt was racially discriminating against his college. Anderson moved to Los Angeles, graduated from Cal State Los Angeles, and spent the next 10 years at the L.A. County Probation Department working with adolescent offenders. He noticed, he says, that the kids responded better when their anger was met with softness and understanding rather than with punishment. Then he decided to become a psychotherapist.

He enrolled at the UCLA School of Social Work, won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and transferred to Smith College in Massachusetts, where he completed his master's degree. He then enrolled at Harvard's School of Medicine, where he became qualified to practice child and adolescent psychotherapy.

He got a teaching post back at UCLA. That was where he met his future wife, a fellow psychology teacher. It was also, he says, a glorious era when faculty members could use their offices to treat private patients between classes. In the early 1980s, the school caught on and began charging faculty members a percentage of their fees. "When I heard that," Anderson says, "I walked around the corner and rented an office. Then I called Nancy and said, 'Guess what? I'm quitting UCLA.' "

This, Anderson says, is when things got interesting. His private practice was percolating along when a group of Xerox Corp. executives in California contracted with him to handle mental health needs for themselves and their children. Then came United Airlines, Amtrak and other corporations; before long Anderson and his wife, who also left UCLA, were running a sort of mental health-only proto-HMO, subcontracting with psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and mental hospitals all over the country. It evolved into a fairly large operation, and A&A charged clients' health insurance companies \$210 per hour for psychiatrist time, \$145 for psychologist time and \$135 for social worker time. Their yearly income exceeded a million dollars. They bought a house in Brentwood.

In the early 1990s, however, the real HMOs took over. Insurance reimbursement, Anderson says, plunged to its current level of about \$90, \$70 and \$60 for those respective services. The first incarnation of Anderson & Anderson collapsed, and Nancy Anderson took the job, which she still holds, of school psychologist at the private John Thomas Dye School in Bel-Air. George Anderson says he wasn't angry, "just depressed."

The depression lifted shortly and Anderson spotted an opportunity. While there were many ambitious programs for treating the mostly female victims of domestic abuse, not many were treating the mostly male perpetrators. He evaluated the only treatment then in use—a feminist-oriented encounter group model called The Duluth Model, which is designed to confront batterers and persuade them to change their ways. He felt that, while the course might be helpful for guilt-ridden Minnesotans, it would be ineffective amid the multicultural mix of domestically violent men in California. So he wrote his own cognitive therapy-based course for offenders. Then he had his workbooks translated into Spanish, Russian and Korean, among other languages. He successfully lobbied, with the help of then-state Sen. Diane Watson, that the California penal

code be amended so that batterers on probation would be required to take a 52-week program much like his own. Anderson still licenses the workbooks and CDs, but he doesn't actively work on the domestic violence side.

"It's not a growth area," he says, noting that practically all domestic violence clients are court-ordered, and their motivation to change usually hovers around zero. But what treatment has transpired may have been helpful: Government figures show that, between 1976 and 2002, the number of women killed each year in domestic disputes dropped from 1,600 to 1,202. The number of men killed in such disputes during that period dropped from 1,357 to 388.

In the mid-1990s, Anderson says, he got a call from L.A. County Superior Court Judge Peter Meeka asking him to define the difference between domestic violence intervention and anger management. Anderson did so, and then proceeded to research, write and offer his own anger management course.

In 1998, he says, he got a call from now-retired Superior Court Judge Kenneth Lee Chotiner. "He asked me, 'Could you afford to send me five copies of your book? I'm on a committee of judges on anger management. We're trying to come up with some way to decide who can treat offenders. If you can possibly afford to send a copy of your book to any judge and court officer, I believe you can get a lot of referrals out of that.' "

Anderson agreed, of course, and every four months he sends every criminal courts judge, commissioner, referee, district attorney, assistant district attorney and public defender in Los Angeles County an updated list of A&A-certified practitioners. He adds quickly that no court officer is actually required to use the list.

Among his professional peers, Anderson's dominance in the field hasn't created much of a visible backlash. Michael Levittan, a Century City-based psychotherapist, has his own anger management method that concentrates on treatment and some executive coaching rather than training. "I do respect George as a colleague," he says. "Our methods have more similarities than differences."

"What's the opposite of anger?"

George Anderson, seated comfortably in the living room of his five-bedroom Brentwood home, just up the street from Norman Lear's house and with a great view of Maria and Arnold's place down the hill, considers the question for a few moments.

"Peace. Joy. Contentment. Satisfaction," he says finally. His wife (the other Anderson in Anderson & Anderson) and two of his three children, Jason, a college student and aspiring chef, and Ania, a flight attendant, are sitting nearby. They smile and nod.

They're all too familiar with the main tenets of their father's psychological philosophy, all included in the 123-page spiral-bound workbook each A&A-based anger management client clutches: first, that anger is not a pathological condition but a "secondary emotion" piggybacking on deeper feelings such as shame or embarrassment, and second, anger often masks more serious conditions such as depression and substance abuse. But there's hope.

"We don't have control over our feelings, but we can control our thoughts," Anderson writes. He posits that the key is to recognize "destructive interactions" such as hostility, manipulation, rage and avoidance and replace them with "constructive interactions" such as assertiveness, rephrasing, stating needs and seeking compromise. One means to that end: emotional intelligence, which he describes as "understanding and recognizing our inner feelings—our weaknesses as well as our strengths." Another is so-called active listening, which he defines as "listening with your heart." As Anderson explains this, he places his hand over his heart.

Alas, the good feelings so evident there in Brentwood Heights are difficult to reproduce elsewhere. Not even Anderson claims his courses can expunge all traces of self-destructive anger. A more straightforward question—one he's asked often—is whether there's objective scientific data to prove his methodology changes anything at all.

Anderson concedes that there's not a lot of scientific proof that anger management training is effective. He does point to a 1999 Canadian study that concluded there was a low recidivism rate among prisoners who took anger management classes, but the evidence accumulated so far doesn't prove much.

The problem—if you prefer to see it that way, which Anderson doesn't—is that anger per se isn't considered a diagnosable mental ailment by either the American Psychiatric Assn. or the American Psychological Assn. in the way that depression or schizophrenia are. Since anger is considered only a symptom of underlying maladies—and can't be treated with a pill, don't forget—major professional associations, academic institutions and pharmaceutical companies don't have the money or motivation to conduct tests and/or establish standards for managing anger. That's also why health insurance doesn't cover anger management.

"The whole field is sort of loosey-goosey," says Mark Mitchell, a Playa del Rey-based non-A&A certified marriage and family therapist who specializes in anger management for executives and corporations.

Jerry Deffenbacher, a psychology professor who studies anger and anger management at Colorado State University, believes that the current state of anger management is an interesting mix of good and bad. "Anger as an emotional issue is diagnosable," he says. "And the courts are stuck with a couple of simple issues." They have a lot of people to sentence for lesser or nonviolent crimes, and not much evidence that putting those people in already overcrowded jails does them much good, says Deffenbacher. "So if I'm a humane jurist, I'm looking for a reasonable alternative that doesn't clog up the system."

The bad part, he adds, is that what little data he has suggests that the methods that work for people who sincerely want to deal with their anger are useless on more hardened characters. They blame the world, their boss or their spouse for their troubles and just want to do their court- or spouse-ordered time and escape. Many people who have been to traffic school can empathize. "What we need to do is design interventions that look at the issue of readiness, then try to see if we can move people to where anger management programs are helpful," Deffenbacher says.

George Anderson agrees. Which is why he's mandated that all A&A practitioners administer to their clients the Conover Anger Management Program (license fee: \$495 to the Conover Co. of Oshkosh, Wis.), an 18-question (short version) or 105-question (long version) questionnaire that, when scored, measures such qualities as "interpersonal communication," "interpersonal deference," "stress management" and, most importantly, "personal change orientation." Scoring low on the last one is a bad sign.

Motivating people to become self-motivated is no mean feat, and beyond the scope of simple anger management, which is why Anderson has come up with "Motivational Interviewing for Mandated Anger Management Clients," a 16-hour, \$250 course for practitioners "designed to introduce basic strategies to engage the client in the process of change."

Anderson is often asked if there's anything that makes *him* angry. "Yes. People questioning my competence or qualifications," he says calmly.

Anderson's next big goal, he says, is to help make his course the standard—official or unofficial—nationwide and even worldwide. But it's nice to have some pull near home, too. Recently, Anderson says, he was driving the family minivan in the vicinity of West Covina when he realized he was heading the wrong way and hung a left across a double yellow line—right in front of a police station.

"So this police officer on his motorcycle stopped me," says Anderson. "And he asked me, 'Do you know what you just did?' And I just sort of frowned and said, 'Yea-a-a-h, I think so. At least part of it was that I turned left across a yellow line.'

"And he said, 'Are you lost?' And I said, 'Yes! Just a second, sir.' And I had this little printout map from Yahoo, and I said, 'Here's where I was trying to go, this credit union.'

"And he said, 'What kind of business do you have?' And I said, 'Oh, we run a business that does anger management. Actually we do a lot of work for law enforcement.' And he started asking questions, and I said, 'Many law enforcement people go through the training because it's an excellent transition for retirement.'

"And then he said, 'I'll make a deal with you. You give me your business card and I'll give you a warning.' And I did, and we shook hands and drove away."