



# Captain Video: the Legacy of David L. Corwin, MD, Founding Chair of APSAC

*Nina Agrawal, MD*

## David L. Corwin, MD

When we sat down to do our legacy interview, we were pleasantly greeted by David Corwin, MD, sitting smack in the middle of a yellow flowered valley flanked by symmetric white-capped mountain ranges. “You have a choice of backgrounds,” Corwin said. “This is a picture taken last fall at Snowbird Resort coming down the mountain on the tram. It’s a pretty picture. I like this one.” Corwin changed his zoom background to an orange glowed sunset with two darkly outlined palm trees. “This is from the Pacific Terrace Hotel where the APSAC Board has stayed and met each January for a number of years. Let’s stay with this.”

For the next two hours, Dr. Corwin took us through the journey of his remarkable career, from the comfort of his desk chair against the virtual backdrop of the sunset over the Pacific in San Diego, where APSAC has been meeting annually for decades. He started by telling us about his friendship with an Italian engineer now living in San Diego but whom Corwin met when they both lived in Orinda, California, during the 1980s. So, what does this engineer have to do with Corwin and his legacy? Upon reading Corwin’s 1997 groundbreaking paper on the APSAC website about a suppressed child sexual abuse memory, the engineer recalled an experience that occurred on his third birthday in Italy. Because it was his birthday, he was allowed to accompany his father, a former naval officer, who was at that time working as a farm manager overseeing workers in a field when men, probably German soldiers, armed with machine guns drove up and

were threatening his father. The 3-year-old clung to his father’s leg. Ultimately, he believed it may have helped save his father’s life because the armed men decided to leave his father alive. It was upon reading Corwin’s article that the engineer recalled this very traumatic event.

As a trained child and adult psychiatrist, Dr. Corwin has had a long-standing interest in how traumatic childhood memories affect people later on in life. When he was a second year psychiatry resident at UCLA doing his child psychiatry rotation at a child guidance clinic, he evaluated two young boys and their mother, which would help guide his entire career. The twin boys were brought to the child guidance clinic for behavioral problems. After evaluating the boys, Dr. Corwin did not have any mental health concerns for the children. However, he did have concerns about the mother. She had disclosed being a victim of intrafamilial child sexual abuse during her adolescence. He began treating her in individual psychotherapy. It was 1977.

“I was clinically impressed, or, rather, horrified by how experiences of sexual abuse could negatively influence her life so much,” said Corwin, with the case still very fresh in his mind.

Corwin had no textbooks or treatment guidelines to refer to. He sought guidance from his supervisors, one of whom he later started working with during his child psychiatry fellowship, Roland Summit, the author of child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome. Within the next five years, he went on

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to see many more patients who had been sexually abused. Eventually, he started videotaping his child abuse evaluations—and fondly began being called by some colleagues and family as “Captain Video.”

In 1981, Dr. Corwin continued to move forward on the little-trodden path of child sexual abuse evaluation and investigation by working with a multi-disciplinary group of professionals, now legacies in their field, who were working with child sexual abuse cases in various settings. These professionals included Roland Summit, Kee MacFarlane, Jill Waterman, Sargent Toby Tyler, and others who called themselves the Los Angeles Task Force on Interviewing Sexually Abused Children. Their first initiative was to recommend video recording the investigative and evaluation interviews of children in suspected child sexual abuse cases. Corwin was making progress.

In 1982, Corwin took his rapidly growing expertise in videotaping child sex abuse interviews on the road. He led the first presentation of this idea at the national symposium on child sexual abuse in Washington, D.C., that spring and later, in the fall of 1982, he presented it with Sargent Tyler at the International Society’s 4th Congress on the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. More training opportunities arose. But, when he was invited to travel to Amsterdam for the Third International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect, he hesitated as he was still in training. He felt unsure about whether he felt ready to continue to devote hours of his limited residency time to keep doing trainings. He sought advice from one of his UCLA child psychiatry faculty advisors. “You become an expert by being an expert,” advised the faculty child psychiatrist. Corwin embraced the advice, presented the six hours of training in Amsterdam, and then spoke in several other European cities in Great Britain. He quickly became a national leader in child sexual abuse—before becoming a full-fledged medical board-certified child psychiatrist.

Upon completion of his psychiatric residency and fellowship, Corwin settled in Northern California, where he started a private practice in child,

adolescent, and adult psychiatry. There, he testified in numerous court cases about child sexual abuse. But, without any clinical guidelines to support his expert opinion, he found testifying grueling. “I can’t continue to do this. It is too hard. I need to find a safer altitude or fly a totally different course,” Corwin told his wife. After some serious soul searching, he decided to continue his career at a “higher altitude.” (The flying metaphor had its origins in his father’s service as a glider pilot in World War II.)

In 1985, Corwin organized the National Summit Conference on Diagnosing Child Sexual Abuse. He led the discussion on creating a diagnostic category for sexually abused children, but found himself in the minority opinion of the more than 100 multi-disciplinary attendees at the Summit, who had been invited because of their work or research with child sexual abuse in investigation, medical, and mental health evaluation, court, treatment, and prevention. However, the dissent did not dampen him, as it never has. He sought consensus. His partners—Joyce Thomas and colleagues from the Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.; a Northern California group of professionals working with child sexual abuse; colleagues in southern California; and others from around the United States—agreed to create a new multi-disciplinary professional society focused specifically on child sexual abuse.

Led by Corwin, the first multi-disciplinary professional societies dedicated to addressing child maltreatment in the United States were founded in July of 1986: APSAC on a national level and CAPSAC in California. APSAC was initially named the American Professional Society on the Victimization of Children (APSVOC). CAPSAC stood for the California Association of Professionals on the Sexual Abuse of Children. The story of how the acronym APSAC came to be, demonstrates the signature ability of Corwin to bring people together:

On July 25, 1986, a group of 28 professionals, led by Corwin, founded the multi-disciplinary organization that later became known as APSAC—the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. David Chadwick, APSAC’s second president, attended a

previous organizing luncheon in New Orleans at the fourth National Symposium on Child Sexual Abuse in May of 1986. Chadwick insisted that if this new multidisciplinary organization focused on just child sexual abuse and not all forms of child maltreatment, he was not “coming along.” At first Board meeting in September of 1986, the Board agreed to expand the focus from child sexual abuse to physical abuse and neglect, aka child maltreatment, to be more inclusive of all forms of maltreatment and the professionals who work to address them. Corwin chaired the first Board meeting of the new national multi-disciplinary professional society. After the EC had been chosen, it elected Jon Conte as APSAC’s first president. On July 24, 1986, Corwin joined with California colleagues to found the California Association of Professionals on the Sexual Abuse of Children (CAPSAC), which subsequently changed its name to California Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (CPSAC). Corwin later became CAPSAC’s first president.

The first thing that Dr. Corwin did as a founding member of APSAC was to create a professional guidelines committee. He then went on to create the *Advisor* newsletter. Although he did not consider himself an expert writer, he was skilled in identifying good talent. He saw a talented writer in John E. B. Myers. Looking back to when he started APSAC, Corwin is proud of what APSAC has accomplished over the past years. “APSAC has become the foremost leader for professional trainings in child abuse in the U.S.”

After a hiatus beginning in the late ‘90s, Corwin was re-elected to APSAC’s Board in 2012. In 2018, he became APSAC’s president. “I wanted to complete the circle and bring symmetry to my career,” said Corwin. From the time of APSAC’s founding in 1986 until now, his goal has remained the same more than three decades later: “To improve professional practice addressing child abuse and neglect.”

One of his last acts as APSAC’s president was to address systemic racism and implicit bias in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. He felt pressured to

issue a statement earlier but wanted to do something more substantial. His vision that APSAC make a larger, multi-year commitment to address implicit bias and systemic racism is being realized. He feels APSAC has had a long-standing effort to increase cultural sensitivity, but Dr. Corwin also strongly supports expanding and sustaining trainings to get all disciplines engaged in addressing racism and other topics important in the field. Regarding the future of APSAC, he would like to see more law enforcement professionals return to APSAC, particularly in leadership positions. He sees law enforcement as critical to helping achieve more needed diversity in discipline representation in APSAC and the key to APSAC’s success.

Corwin attributes his persistence and success to his mother. “She filled me with a sense that I could do anything -- if you are raised to believe that you can do something, it becomes internal, and you feel capable of doing great things.”

Corwin’s greatest accomplishments cannot be found on the CV he sent us. “I’m going to show you something,” he said as his computer camera panned to portraits on his walls and landed on his home office window. A beautiful black-brown Bengal cat could be seen lounging on a window sling. “Gilley,” he called. As cats will do, Gilley continued to gaze out of the window without a flinch. Corwin explained that Gilley belonged to his deceased daughter, Jessica. She died in 2011 just shy of 28 years old of a fentanyl-methamphetamine toxic interaction. APSAC was founded on Jessica’s third birthday. Gilley is Jessica’s spirit cat, Corwin explained. “When your children die, you don’t want to let go of them and your memories of them. I choose not to resolve their loss—instead, I surround myself with them.”

Corwin pointed to a group of nicely laid out portraits on his office wall. Each portrait is one of his children. For each child, he tells us their name and something uniquely characteristic—a talent, a personality, a memorable event, such as his younger daughter Andrea’s wedding and his son Aaron’s stint in the Marines.

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Corwin leaves our camera view for a minute. He returns with a copy of a school notebook and a piece of paper with handwriting. It was written by Justin, his oldest adopted son. With emotion in his voice, Corwin reads the handwritten note, thanking Corwin for his fatherly role in his life. “My potential outweighs his,” Justin wrote, making a comparison with his father. Corwin is proud, embodying his ability to see and bring out the strengths in his children.

We became “emotional” as well, taking a pause to celebrate the life and legacy of his children and him as a father. He further tells us that three of the adult children in his photo wall gallery have died. He described Zach as the handsome young man whom my Marine son, Aaron, has his arm around. He explained that Zach died about a year ago. Justin died at age 39 in October of 2020 from complications of appendicitis, for which he failed to seek medical care soon enough due to his and others’ fears of COVID-19. “Two weeks ago, 15 of our family members gathered beside the ocean near Poipu Beach, Kauai, and spread some of Zach’s ashes.” Zach was my wife Vicki’s oldest son. I loved Zach, too. We had a beautiful and loving memorial for him.”

Corwin’s legacy cannot be captured in one sentence or even this one article. The common thread is his wonderful ability to bring people together and consider different ideas respectfully, while improving the trajectory of the life of child abuse victims and those close to him. Dr. Corwin reflected, “The value of what I have done is to those whom I and the rest of us have been able to help. I know what I have done, and I feel I have contributed and hope to contribute more. The interview with you and these documents describe what has been my great privilege to do. I have made many mistakes and offended some on my journey, but I have always tried to do the right thing, just as with my patients, subjects, and the raising of my children. I feel a bit like the old man at the end of *Saving Private Ryan* who is seeking some assurance that he has been a good man in his life. As it draws closer to the end, I believe that I have been,

and ultimately, we each know ourselves the best. I urge others to live good lives and give as much as they can to make the world a better place. That is all anyone can do of greatest value! As my 86-year-old paternal grandfather told me when I was 19 or 20 and searching for the meaning of life and how best to live mine, “It’s about the people!”

As to what Dr. Corwin would like to see APSAC accomplish in the next decade, he said, “I’d like to see [APSAC] stay true to its mission to bring different disciplines together to address challenges associated with ... child maltreatment, and to do so in a democratic and just way.”

### About the Author

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