

# Compassion & Choices Northern California Newsletter

Summer 2011



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## Sundance Festival Film “How to Die in Oregon” Available on HBO

As of May, HBO subscribers have been watching “How to Die in Oregon” a moving portrayal of mentally competent terminally-ill individuals who choose to end their lives using Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act. This film, directed by Peter D. Richardson and awarded best documentary film by the Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize, shows Compassion & Choices’ End-of-Life Consultation volunteers providing support and counseling to terminally-ill individuals, including Cody Curtis a 54-year old woman dying of liver cancer.

In addition to the Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize, “How to Die in Oregon” received numerous other awards including best documentary film at the Portland International Film Festival, the Ashland Independent Film Festival, the Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award and the Kathleen Bryan Edwards Award for Human Rights.

“How to Die in Oregon” is available on HBO (TV showings available at <http://www.hbo.com/#/schedule/detail/focusId/706689?startTime=2011-05-03T17:23:28Z&cmpid=ABC464>), and it is also available On Demand. This summer, the film will



*“How to Die in Oregon” follows several terminally-ill individuals including, Cody Curtis.*

be shown on The Sundance Channel and will be available for rent and purchase in fall 2011.

Friends and families are encouraged to watch this film together with the hope that it promotes discussion about your own end-of-life wishes. Compassion & Choices has links to discussion starters and commonly asked questions for these gatherings (available at <https://compassionandchoices.org/h2dor>). To get in touch with Compassion & Choices’ End-of-Life Consultation Team call 866-825-8967 or email [admin@compassionandchoicesnca.org](mailto:admin@compassionandchoicesnca.org).

## Geoff Hoyle's *Geezer* Benefits Compassion & Choices



Geoff Hoyle with board member Fran Johns.

Compassion & Choices' supporters enjoyed Geoff Hoyle's show *Geezer* at the San Francisco Marsh Theater on March 17. *Geezer* is a wry, unblinking look at the business of aging and the relentless approach of death. But Hoyle, a genius at mime, comedy, and zany physicality makes it all fun. Bay Area News Group critic Pat Craig, writes, "This off-kilter autobiography that examines the decline and fall of all men, as seen through Hoyle's eyes, is perhaps the most poignant and personal of the comic's great canon, and it's certainly worth seeing, particularly if you've been

thinking more about the grim reaper than your SAT scores recently."

After several Compassion & Choices' supporters caught *Geezer* in workshop last spring, Hoyle met with board members Rebecca Forest and Fran Johns to discuss a benefit performance. He was enthusiastic from the beginning. Forest, Johns, and fellow board member Dr. Bob Liner then approached the father-&-son owner/managers of Aslam's Rasoi restaurant across the street for a reception before the performance to add to the pleasure of the evening.

Several thousand dollars were raised through the event, which included time for questions with Hoyle, who was joined by board members Dr. Robert Brody and Carole van Aelstyn.

If you missed the benefit, several dates for *Geezer* have been added and sliding scale tickets are available through [www.themarsh.org](http://www.themarsh.org) (or you can watch for it on Broadway!).

## Support Choice in California

*Compassion & Choices Northern California educates terminally-ill individuals and their families about their rights to a dignified, humane, and peaceful death. We strive to increase awareness of, and access to, the full range of end-of-life choices and advocate for change to existing laws. Please consider making a gift today. Donations can be sent in the enclosed envelope, you may call (866) 825-8967 to process a credit card donation, or make a secure gift on our website at: [www.compassionandchoicesn-ca.org/contribute.php](http://www.compassionandchoicesn-ca.org/contribute.php). Thank you for supporting end-of-life choice!*

## California Advocacy Update

The California Right to Know End-of-Life Options Act is the first in the nation to provide terminally-ill patients with a full disclosure of, and counseling about, all available end-of-life care options accepted in law and medicine. This landmark law, passed with our leadership in 2008, removes numerous barriers separating terminally-ill patients from the information they need to understand their full range of treatment options. When requested, information about hospice care, the right to refuse life-sustaining treatment, the right to refuse curative treatment, and the right to receive palliative (pain management) care are discussed.

The challenge is that few Californians know about the law, including medical personnel. This lack of knowledge, led to dire consequences for Michelle Hargett-Beebe. In fall 2009, Michelle died of pancreatic cancer. In the end stages of her illness, she was in severe pain. Her parents advocated strongly on her behalf for optimal care and pain management to VITAS, Michelle's hospice facility. But VITAS failed to tell her or her parents about medications available to her that would have eased her pain and as a result, she died in agony.

Compassion & Choices filed a groundbreaking lawsuit in Alameda Superior Court on Michelle and her family's behalf to hold VITAS accountable for its failure to treat her pain as she approached death and for VITAS' disregard for its obligations under The California Right to Know End-of-Life Options Act. *Hargett v. VITAS* will be the first case in the nation to argue that a hospice recklessly falls below the medical standard of care when it not only fails to provide adequate pain management but also when it fails to inform the patient about palliative care options. This case should bring more awareness of the Right to Know End-of-Life Options Act to Californians and their doctors.

## Scholarship Contest Raises Awareness

To encourage the younger generation to think about end-of-life issues, Compassion & Choices Northern California is pleased to sponsor the fourth annual *Matters of Life & Death Scholarship Writing Contest*. College-bound high school students were invited to respond to the prompt: *Why should California pass a law that protects aid in dying for terminally-ill patients who are suffering at the end of their lives?*

In years past, we have seen how young minds grapple with this question. It is incredibly reaffirming to read some of their submissions. Here are two memorable examples. Our first place winner from 2009, Arunima Rashidee, took a philosophical approach:

“Every man has the right to risk his own life in order to preserve it. Has it ever been said that a man who throws himself out the window to escape from a fire is guilty of suicide?” The right to die is in keeping with famed philosopher John-Jacques Rousseau’s idea of self-preservation at the cost of death.

Jerry Lou, our 2010 first place winner, considered the constitutionality and morality of the issues involved:

Since terminally-ill patients suffer substantially from their ailment and often the treatment as well, assisted death does not run counter to the basic purpose of medicine, as it fulfills the objective of improving an individual’s quality of life. In this manner, patient-directed dying is both constitutional and moral: constitutional in its support of a natural right and moral in its alleviation of pain and suffering.

We look forward to announcing this year’s winners soon and publishing the winning essay. Our first place winner will receive \$1,000, second place \$500, and third \$250.

### Visit our Website for a Wealth of Resources on End-of-Life Planning

Visit [www.compassionandchoicesnca.org](http://www.compassionandchoicesnca.org) to see a wealth of information on end-of-life planning. On our website you will find an advance directive specific to California, revised California POLST form (effective April 1, 2011), and links to the Good to Go Toolkit and Good To Go Resource Guide (referenced in Jane E. Brody’s [New York Times](#) article “Keep Your Voice, Even at the End of Life” on January 17, 2011).

## The Hugh Gallagher Award



*Ken Williams presents the award to Merla Zellerbach.*

Merla Zellerbach, board member of Compassion and Choices Northern California, was presented with the 2010 Hugh Gallagher Award, honoring her support and dedication to choice and human liberty at the end of life. The award was presented last October by Ken Williams, Director of Development for Compassion and Choices, at a lovely reception attended by fellow Compassion and Choices Northern California board members, Merla’s family and friends.

The Hugh Gallagher Award was created by Peter Kovler to commemorate the significant contributions of Hugh Gallagher, an author and international disability advocate who used his writing to educate the public about injustices, to promote understanding among diverse populations, and to draw people into the choice-in-dying movement. The Award is given annually by Compassion and Choices in recognition of a person who has been the most effective in bringing people, especially those of diverse age, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and persons with disabilities, to greater understanding of end-of-life choice and care issues and to Compassion and Choices as an organization.

Last year, Merla was the gracious host of an event featuring [New York Times](#) columnist and author Jane Brody, who spoke about her book, “Jane Brody’s Guide to the Great Beyond”. The event was sold out and very well received by all who attended. Compassion & Choices Northern California offers our appreciation and admiration for all Merla has done to sponsor, endorse, and advance advocacy efforts in support of end-of-life choice, especially in Northern California.

## Find Compassion & Choices Events throughout Northern California

Compassion & Choices Northern California's presence in our community has taken a leap forward over the last year. In October, we initiated Compassion & Choices Month in honor of the month the Death with Dignity law was enacted in Oregon. During C&C Month, we held 27 talks in homes, libraries, and college classes to let people know about our work to support, educate, and advocate for end-of-life choice.

We've been at senior and adult health fairs in Petaluma, San Jose, Marin, Napa, Santa Rosa, Richmond, and Hayward, and in the coming months will be at fairs in Oakland, Hayward, and Marin. New events are regularly posted on our website at: <http://www.compassionandchoicesnca.org/upcomingevents.php>.

At the fairs we provide guests with information on completing Advance Directives, the Good to Go Resource Guide, and information about The Right to Know End-of-Life Options Act. We also discuss Compassion & Choices' free service providing counseling to the terminally-ill and their loved ones.



*Hetty Herman-Minsk and Carole van Aelstyn at the Bennett Valley Health and Wellness Fair.*

Compassion & Choices Northern California gives talks at senior centers, adult communities, libraries, and other venues. We are available to discuss end-of-life topics and tailor a program to address the specific areas of interest to your audience. If you are interested, contact us at [admin@compassionandchoicesnca.org](mailto:admin@compassionandchoicesnca.org) or call (866) 825-8967.