

## Film director puts human face on assisted suicide

NEW YORK (Reuters - May 24, 2011) - It may appear morose, but the director of a heart-wrenching documentary about doctor-assisted dying in Oregon hopes his film offers an uplifting lesson on how to live life.



With the blunt title, "How to Die in Oregon," the documentary debuts on cable channel HBO on Thursday after winning the top nonfiction film prize earlier this year at the Sundance Film Festival.

It aims to put a human face on the 17-year old "Death With Dignity Act" in Oregon that made the U.S. state one of the few places in the world where doctors can prescribe lethal drugs to terminally ill patients. In the case of Oregon, the patient must have less than six months to live.

"We did not feel this would be a depressing film," the director Peter Richardson, 31, told Reuters in a recent interview. He said the film unfolds as "tragic but life affirming...people who have seen the film are very surprised at how much humor and laughter there is."

The documentary centers on Cody Curtis, a 54-year-old wife and mother who is given six months to live after she is diagnosed with cancer of the liver. Her family, doctor and her own thoughts on the divisive issue are caught in compelling, difficult-to-watch interviews on camera.

"In Cody's story you see it is not an easy choice," said Richardson. "Cody acknowledges a dignity and grace in suffering but there is also a dignity in accepting the inevitable."

### SOCIETY CAN'T FACE DEATH

The film also offer snippets of those opposed to the law, including a 53-year-old uninsured Oregonian with prostate cancer who is denied health care by the state and offered physician-assisted suicide instead.

Richardson noted that the so-called right to die debate raises similar issues to those surrounding passionate arguments over abortion in the United States.

"There is still that 'Whose life is it?' And many people coming from a religious perspective feel that it is not a person's place to take their own life."

Others want control over their treatment, death with dignity and to spare their families the costs and burdens of keeping them alive.

The film also follows the crusade of one woman who honors her husband by fighting for similar choices in the state of Washington, which passed similar legislation in 2008.

Richardson said the film highlights a larger conversation about dying that is shunned by society, and is timely due to the growing population of elderly Americans, national debt and healthcare costs.

In the past 100 years, "we have kind of sequestered our daily view" of sickness and dying, he said. "It has basically been something that has been put into hospitals. Before this period many more people died at home."

"I don't know that is necessarily a good thing," he continued, "because we have totally closed our eyes to the fact that we are all terminal and death and dying -- we are all going to have to face."

More than 500 Oregonians have used the law to end their lives since it was first passed in 1994. Assisted suicide is also legal in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Luxembourg and Belgium.