

'How to Die in Oregon': a Portland director's prize-winning documentary about Death With Dignity comes to HBO

From The Oregonian, May 24, 2011

Documentary filmmaker Peter Richardson, whose "How to Die in Oregon" won the grand jury prize at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival.

The Oregonian

The phrase "How to Die in Oregon" may seem at first blush like a joke or a non-sequitur -- and certainly not the sort of thing you might see on a multiplex marquee or a movie poster plastered on the side of a bus.

But "[How to Die in Oregon](#)" is, in fact, the title of one of the most powerful and acclaimed movies of the year. Starting in 2007, Portland filmmaker Peter Richardson conducted interviews with a number of terminally ill Oregonians who were considering availing themselves of the right to choose the hour and manner of their passing under the state's Death With Dignity Act.

The resulting movie about their hearts, minds, families, doubts, beliefs, fears, joys and struggles won the top documentary prize at January's [Sundance Film Festival](#) and several other notable honors since then. It premieres Thursday night on HBO, and will air periodically thereafter on the channel. And, true to its prize-winning pedigree, it will make you think and make you cry like very few films you will ever see.

"How to Die in Oregon" is Richardson's follow-up to his impressive debut, "Clear Cut: The Story of Philomath, Oregon," which also reaped kudos for its evenhanded examination of cultural issues that drove a rift between residents of the Willamette Valley community in which Richardson was raised. In fact, that first film almost literally led Richardson to his latest work.

As he explained at a coffee shop during Sundance, "The idea for this film came when I was leaving for Sundance with 'Clear Cut.' As you do, you want to go to Sundance with your next idea to talk about. And the morning I was leaving, I was staying at a hotel at the Portland Airport, and there was a USA Today outside my door with a headline about the Supreme Court upholding Oregon's right-to-die law. And when I saw that, it was very, very clear to me that it was the next film that I would make."

Richardson put four years into finding interview subjects from all around Oregon and even hopping across the Columbia to Washington, where a right-to-die statute similar to Oregon's was on the 2008 ballot. He filmed 16 terminally ill subjects in all, none more often or more closely or to more devastating impact than Cody Curtis, a buoyant and folksy Portland



woman who ended a long battle with liver cancer in 2009 by taking a lethal dose of drugs. Intelligent, sympathetic, pretty, honest and brave, Curtis has become the central figure in discussions of the film, and the intimacy with which Richardson captures and shares her story and that of her family brings the audience deeply into the very real and human dimensions of an issue that can often seem more political and polemical than personal.

Indeed, one of the reasons that "How to Die" is such an overwhelming film is the extremely intimate nature of the interviews. As Richardson admits, he initially felt like an intruder merely for seeking permission to interview people, let alone asking to witness and record such profound moments in their lives.

"When I first started making the film," he says, "I almost wanted to apologize to the first person I was shooting, because it's such a critical and sensitive time to come into a person's life and say 'I want to bring a camera into this.' But ultimately I was always present at the people's invitation. And that was the ground rule that was laid out: I would ask to be there, and they could tell me whether it was OK or not. But, even when there were times when every fiber in my being was telling me to put the camera down, I also knew that the people were aware that I was there and wanted their stories told."

It was filming Curtis, with whom Richardson developed a deep bond, that was most difficult for the filmmaker.

"For me," he says, "the hardest moment in filming was when Cody came home after going to OHSU and seeing all of her friends and then came home and broke down. I came very, very close to putting the camera down and saying, 'I can't film this.' I had been close to her for a while, and I had been making the film for a couple of years, and I had become used to these extreme situations. But then I realized that Cody asked me to be there that day, and I was only a few feet from her at that moment, and to not film would almost have been kind of disrespectful to her in a way, because it would have been censoring the reality of what she was going through."

As a kind of counterweight to the harrowing spectacle of severely ill people grappling with literal life-and-death questions, the film spends time observing the debate in Washington, where a right-to-die law had failed with voters in the years before the Oregon bill passed. Naturally, the process and impact of Oregon's law weighed in the conversation in Washington. As Richardson explains, "The argument that was made on the pro side was 'Look at Oregon, and look at how well things are going in Oregon.'"

Many of the arguments made against the 2008 Washington ballot measure (which passed, by the way) were similar to those that had been raised against the Oregon law prior to its passage - and had been more or less disproven by the record of its years of implementation.

But there was one episode in Oregon that gave opponents of right-to-die statutes elsewhere some real ammunition, namely a form letter that state medical authorities sent to some patients denying them continued cancer treatment but offering them palliative care, including physician assisted suicide, instead. "When those stories went public," Richardson recalls, "the fact that death-with-dignity was on that piece of paper allowed some people to connect political dots. In places like Fox News they would say, 'Aha! This is the death panel! People are being denied coverage and being put to death!'" "How to Die" includes an interview with one of the people who received that letter, cancer patient Randy Stroup of Dexter.

At first, Richardson says he didn't know whether Stroup's story belonged in the film. "I was focused on the stories of Oregonians going through this process," he says, "and I didn't want to get caught up in stories about bogeymen, of which there are a lot. I wanted to keep it centered on actual human experience."

But meeting Stroup changed his mind. "I saw how hurt he was by the letter," Richardson says. "It wasn't just that he was denied coverage. It was that he was told that they would help him die and that he interpreted that as the state telling him to die. That was when I thought that there was a difference between the intellectual argument about why those words were in there and the actual impact that reading them would have."

That message -- the difference between the abstract discussion of right-to-die and the human experience of it -- is embodied in the story of Ray Carnay, a longtime Oregon journalist and radio personality who asked his doctor for a lethal prescription in case he decided to take his own life (he eventually died without using the drugs). According to Richardson, "Ray was very, very conservative politically and was extremely opposed to this law in his career as a radio talk-show host. And then when he got his diagnosis, he completely changed. And he told me, 'Peter, you never know until you're there.' And I think that's very true for a lot of people."

That's the essence of "How to Die in Oregon." As in "Clear Cut," in which both sides of a contentious issue ultimately felt well-served by Richardson's evenhandedness, the film isn't an effort to advocate one side or another of an intense and complex issue but to understand how the issue plays out in the ordinary lives of ordinary people.

That disinterested standard, Richardson explains, was built into the film from the start. "I didn't go into the film with a preference one way or another," he says, "and I wouldn't even say that I emerged from making it with a preference one way or another. There is a distinction between 'Clear Cut' and this film in that this one is definitely more focused on one side than the other. But that was, for lack of a better phrase, where the story was -- the one that I was interested in telling, anyhow. There is legitimate opposition: Some religious groups are against it, some disability advocates, some physicians.

"But that being said, as we know, a lot of the arguments that are frequently made against the law have not proven to come true in Oregon, because there are protections in place. In the long term that may not be the case. But Oregon's law is written very specifically to eliminate a lot of unwanted possibilities."

It's also safe to say that in the long term, when anyone discusses the pros and cons of Death With Dignity, they'll have to consider this fine and truthful and powerful film about just how the law effects the lives -- and deaths -- of the people whom it touches.