

'How to Die in Oregon' takes top documentary prize at Sundance

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["How to Die in Oregon."](#) an intimate and poignant film about the impact of Oregon's 1994 Death With Dignity Act, won the Grand Jury Prize in the U. S. Documentary Competition at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival tonight, one of the most prestigious awards that can be won by a non-fiction film anywhere in the world.

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Director Peter D. Richardson, an Oregon native whose debut feature, ["Clear Cut: The Story of Philomath, Oregon,"](#) played to acclaim at Sundance in 2006, stood atop a field of 16 competing documentaries that were selected from a field of 841 submissions.

Notably, three other films made in Oregon or by Oregon filmmakers were in competition with "How to Die." And to give the prize an even more homey aspect, it was announced by Portland native Matt Groening, the creator of "The Simpsons" and one of five members of the festival's U. S. Documentary jury.

Accepting his prize at Sundance's award ceremony in Park City, Utah, Richardson thanked "the extraordinary individuals who allowed me to enter and document their lives. I love you. This award is for and because of you."

"How to Die," which will have its local debut at the Portland International Film Festival in February and appear on the HBO cable network later in the year, is an account of the process by which several Oregon residents, particularly Cody Curtis, a 54-year-old Portland woman with recurring liver cancer, chose to end their lives with the administration of a physician-prescribed dose of barbiturates. The film also depicts the debate over whether terminally ill Washington state residents should be allowed to end their lives similarly, a ballot initiative which was successfully voted into law in 2008.

Earlier in the festival, Richardson admitted in an interview that he hadn't "given a lot of thought to the competition. Being here and knowing that a lot of people will see it is the important thing to me. This wasn't an easy journey -- both practically and personally -- but I just had to make this film."

Richardson's wasn't the only Oregon film to take home a prize. ["If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front,"](#) by New York-based director Marshall Curry, won the U. S. Documentary Editing Award. The film traces the life and actions of a New York man, Daniel McGowan, who was charged of taking part in arson fires committed at a lumber company and tree farm in Glendale and Clatskanie. McGowan faced sentencing under statutes that labeled him and his fellow defendants as domestic terrorists.

