

CHAR ANDREWS: 1937-2006

## Assisted-suicide activist dies battling cancer

Friends say they were inspired by Salem woman's determination, strength

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Char Andrews, known publicly for her support of Oregon's Death with Dignity Act, died Wednesday at her home in Salem.

Andrews, 68, had been living with Stage 4 breast cancer since December 2000.

Her diagnosis spurred her involvement in cancer support groups and fundraising for cancer research. That, coupled with her involvement in groups as varied as the Chemeketans, a local hiking club, and the Institute for Continued Learning through Willamette University, made her something of a local celebrity.

But her decision to sign on as a patient plaintiff in defense of Oregon's physician-assisted suicide law put Andrews' life in the national spotlight. She became a prominent voice in the international debate about the right-to-die issue.

Andrews did not take lethal medication Wednesday, although she had started the process last month.

She still was undergoing chemotherapy after more than four continuous years of it. Less than two weeks ago, she had interviewed to be a part of a clinical trial for a new drug.

And her calendar for the next month was booked. Andrews was planning a trip to Diamond Lake Resort with the Chemeketans; a visit to the Oregon Coast with her son, Mike, and grandchildren in mid-August; and a celebration Aug. 27 for her friends Phil and Erin Hanni for their 50th wedding anniversary.

It's this attitude of determination and strength that friends and acquaintances said they admired about Andrews.

Andrews spoke openly about the spread of cancer to her bones and liver, her chemotherapy treatments and her belief that she should have the right to choose to take life-ending medication.

Caleb Heppner, a Salem resident with lung cancer that has spread to his lymph nodes and bones, said Andrews was a role model for him and convinced him to speak up about Oregon's Death with Dignity Act. Heppner was featured by several news organizations just before the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Oregon's law.



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**Charlene Andrews**

Known as: Char.

Born: Sept. 27, 1937 in Coolidge, Ariz.

Education: Oregon College of Education (now Western Oregon University) from 1975-78.

Career: Teacher in juvenile corrections for 20 years and 1 1/2 years in the Yupik Village of Tuntutuliak, Alaska.

Diagnosed: In December 2000 with Stage 4 breast cancer that had spread to her hip bones.

Activities: Hiking, climbing, traveling, tennis, continuing education through Willamette University, raising money for breast cancer research and advocacy work for Oregon's Death with Dignity Act.

In lieu of flowers: The family requests children's books for the library that Andrews started in Belize during her time in the Peace Corps.

"I think people have some real misconceptions about (aid in dying)," he said. "One of the big (misconceptions) is that people who support it don't value life, and yet Char did. For her, it was a matter of being independent and being able to be in control of life all the way to the end."

Andrews wasn't shy about explaining her viewpoints.

She was featured in national and international newspapers and on television, testified in front of state legislators and attended oral arguments in front of the U.S. Supreme Court in October.

Oregonians voted in support of physician-assisted suicide in 1994 and in 1997.

Then-U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft challenged Oregon's law in 2001 on the basis that it violates the federal Controlled Substances Act and that doctors dispensing drugs to assist people in taking their lives is not a "legitimate medical purpose." In October, the Supreme Court said that "the attorney general claims extraordinary authority" in taking that action and that it would be a "radical shift of authority" away from the states to the federal government if it were allowed.

"While the Oregon attorney general's office was focusing on legality of the issue, (Char) kept a very positive human face on the issue," said Mary Williams, the solicitor general for the state.

The same week that the Supreme Court heard oral arguments, Andrews spoke at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. As Andrews described her cancer and desire to be in control at the end of her life, she pulled off her wig.

"The temptation is always to seem healthy and not burden people with how sick we are," said Barbara Coombs Lee, the president of Compassion & Choices. "Particularly Char, she was very lighthearted and had a real love of life -- that was the face she put forward.

"It was particularly remarkable to take that mask of wellness down and let people see that she was struggling with cancer," she said about the impact Andrews made when she showed her bald head.

Her many friends in Salem also saw Andrews as an amazing symbol of strength.

"She's powerful," Pam Williams said at a recent party in Andrews' honor. "It took guts to go to Washington to do what she did and speak up like she did. She set a wonderful path."

Andrews was the last patient plaintiff to sign on to the lawsuit to defend the state's unique law.

"She took her place in a line of people fighting for Oregon's law and all the people who come after her who will receive enormous comfort just from knowing it is there," Coombs Lee said. "Char was there for them."

Andrews is survived by her daughter Sue Spengler; son Michael Andrews; four grandchildren; and brother Ross Vaughn. A public memorial service is being planned.

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