Death With Dignity WINS

OUTSMART Dementia

Olympia Dukakis Answers Our 5 Questions
Champions Circle monthly giving program allows you to contribute automatically each month, helping us plan our work more effectively. Signing up is simple, and you can make changes or cancel at any time.

Join our Champions Circle with the envelope in this issue or online at CompassionAndChoices.org/Donate

Be a CHAMPION for Choice

Knowing that I am automatically, once a month, financially supporting Compassion & Choices as it assists families such as mine gives me great satisfaction.”

– Kathy Cerminara, Fort Lauderdale, FL

Outsmart Dementia: State Your End-of-Life Wishes
A supporter urges everyone to add C&C’s exclusive dementia provision to their advance directive.

Death With Dignity Is a Winning Election Issue
Increasingly, candidates are successfully campaigning on a death-with-dignity platform.

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Compassion & Choices is the nation’s oldest and largest nonprofit organization working to improve care and expand choice at the end of life. We:
Support patients and families
Educate the public and professionals
Advocate across the nation
Advancing death with dignity since 1980. Learn more at CompassionAndChoices.org.
The Power of You

Each of us holds the potential to effect great change. Grassroots initiatives like the end-of-life choice movement grow gradually, one person at a time, doing what we can to contribute. It may be a financial gift, a petition signature, a passed-on magazine or simply a conversation about why this issue is important. And all those individual efforts eventually add up to major results that influence decision-makers, change laws and improve lives at every stage.

Supporters all over the country are proving the impact of a single action. Dr. Rebecca Moss (p. 6) turned the pain of her husband’s dementia into an op-ed that was picked up by 30 different newspapers, spurring more than 300 readers to ask Compassion & Choices for our dementia provision. A growing number of politicians are making public statements in support of death-with-dignity laws and pledging to work toward their passage (p. 8). Eric Kress (p. 11), as a supporter of the right to die, triggered the death of his father. His mother’s experience led Holder-Winfield to add support of the state’s death-with-dignity bill to his campaign message. He handily defeated a death-with-dignity opponent in the election for the Senate seat.

I thank all of you for the many ways you help make a difference; they’re all so important. Let’s each keep doing what we can to build toward a more autonomous end of life for everyone.

Barbara Coombs Lee
PA, FNP, JD, President

PS. As I’m sure you noticed, we’ve refreshed our look a bit. This issue debuts our new logo and design of Compassion & Choices magazine. Here’s to bolder and brighter days ahead!

words & pictures

“There’s nothing else in the United States that so many people agree with,” Compassion & Choices President Barbara Coombs Lee told Diane Rehm on her NPR-syndicated show, referring to the 70 percent of people who support aid in dying. The episode aired one week after the painful death of Rehm’s husband, John, from Parkinson’s disease. Since he lived in Maryland – a state without a death-with-dignity law – John voluntarily stopped eating and drinking (VSED) to end his suffering.

“He was six feet tall, 120 pounds, and he died … it was a horrible death. People should have the right to choose,” Paramus nurse and Compassion & Choices New Jersey Leadership Committee member Debra Dunn said of her late husband on WABC-TV’s New Jersey Viewpoint.

The program cited C&C’s poll showing 62 percent of Garden State voters support death with dignity.

One week later, the state Assembly Health and Senior Services Committee approved the Aid in Dying for the Terminally Ill Act.


“People don’t want to die … but they are dying,” President Barbara Coombs Lee said to U.S. News. “And they want to have aid-in-dying medication in case their dying process is unbearable.”

Richard Branson, “An assisted-dying law to die.” And according to entrepreneur Richard Branson, “An assisted-dying law would not result in more people dying, but in fewer people suffering.”

International media sources buzzed with enthusiastic support from notable figures for Britain’s pending assisted-dying bill, modeled on Oregon’s Death-With-Dignity law. Retired Anglican Archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu stated, “I have been fortunate to spend my life working for dignity for the living. Now I wish to apply my mind to the issue of dignity for the dying. I revere the sanctity of life – but not at any cost.” Legendary physicist Stephen Hawking said, “We should not take away the freedom of the individual to choose to die.” And according to entrepreneur Richard Branson, “An assisted-dying law would not result in more people dying, but in fewer people suffering.”
One by one, Compassion & Choices advocates are adding power to the end-of-life choice movement. In the past year we have:

**YOU** + **ME** + **HIM** + **HER**

= **Gained 8,462 new donors**

= **Published 47 letters to the editor by supporters**

= **Recruited nearly 700 active volunteers**

= **Amassed 20,344 Facebook fans**

= **Collected over 10,000 petition signatures**

**words to live (and die) by**

**PETITION:**
A written request that people sign to show they want a governing body, person or organization to do or change something. An example is gathering signatures to put a measure on a ballot. Another is petitioning a county Board of Commissioners to take an action.

**GRASSROOTS:**
Movements created spontaneously through a collective desire for change and fueled by the activities of individuals with shared goals at the local level. Volunteers choose their involvement, including distributing information, holding meetings and talking directly with others to increase support.

**CANVASS:**
To ask people what they think about an issue, candidate, project or idea, to poll how they will vote, or to gain their support. Canvassing can include going door to door or making telephone calls.

**“LIKE”/“SHARE”:**
Ways to give personal endorsement on Facebook. When someone “likes” or “shares” Facebook content, it appears on their timeline and in their friends’ news feeds, increasing its audience. Further, “liking” an organization’s page subscribes you to its notifications and updates.

Find out how you can help in these and other ways by calling 800.247.7421 or visiting www.bit.ly/ccgetinvolved!
Longtime Compassion & Choices supporter Dr. Rebecca Moss wrote an op-ed this year about her husband’s struggle with dementia. Thirty newspapers, including The Orlando Sentinel, Tulsa World and The Battle Creek (MI) Enquirer, published this firsthand account of how life changes for people with dementia and those who care for them.

Dr. Moss’ poignant story, which underscores the need for every American to add C&C’s dementia provision to their advance directive, prompted hundreds of calls to our End-of-Life Consultation phone line to request the document. A single voice truly can make a significant impact.

One day in April 2004 my husband of 45 years, L. Howard Moss, III, laid down for a nap, woke up, did not know who I was, and never knew again.

I became a caregiver in an instant and threw myself into providing him all the warmth and safety and bits of happiness I could, and at first, he could manage simple self-care tasks.

Tragically, my highly educated scientist husband not only did not know his wife and family – this condition is called “Capgras syndrome” – but he had also lost what are called “higher functions,” to understand even simple things, such as how to make a telephone call or turn on a radio.

After four years as his caregiver, I could no longer meet his needs, so I was forced to place him in a facility that cared only for dementia patients. And for four more years, I observed almost daily what he and the other patients experienced on their descents to eventual death. The intentions of the staff were kindly, but everything possible was done to prolong this existence, which I came to think of as “pseudo-life.” And I came to a horrific realization.

As a retired physician, I would not have thought that there was a worse fate than painful terminal cancer, or end-stages of multiple sclerosis, or ALS. But now I know better. Nearly 15 million people provide unpaid care for Alzheimer’s or other dementias, and about 60 percent of the caregivers are women, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

As a result of my husband’s nightmare experience, I learned that you can add a dementia provision to your advance directive or living will to help avoid the kind of unnecessary suffering that he endured at the end of life. The dementia provision specifies what life-sustaining treatment, food or fluids you want – or do not want – to receive if you develop severe dementia.

Our society is slowly recognizing that when death is inevitable, it is only humane to allow a choice to end the suffering if the person desires it. God and nature have decreed that we are mortal; we can only honor life by preventing the suffering of the weakest among us, for whom death is inevitable.

By Rebecca Moss, M.D

You can get a free dementia provision by calling 800.247.7421 or at www.bit.ly/dementiaprovision

In addition to the dementia provision that only C&C offers, we have additional tools to guide your planning in our Good-to-Go Toolkit, and they’re all free:

» “My Particular Wishes” values worksheet to structure your decision-making

» Links to state advance directive forms

» Contract rider for assisted-living facilities to ensure your new home respects your choices

CompassAndChoices.org
In Maryland on June 5, one week before early primary voting began, the state’s Catholic Conference published a survey of the gubernatorial candidates on five key issues, including death with dignity. Despite the conference’s vocal opposition to death with dignity, gubernatorial candidate Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown – who was heavily favored to win the Democratic primary – defiantly commented in the survey: “While as a delegate I voted against prohibiting [death with dignity].”

A Baltimore Sun poll just before the survey was published showed Brown leading the primary race with 41 percent against Attorney General Doug Gansler (20%) and Del. Heather Mizeur (15%). Eight weeks earlier, Mizeur had become the first Maryland gubernatorial candidate to publicly pledge to pass death-with-dignity legislation if elected governor.

After the survey’s publication, the candidates who had expressed support for death with dignity saw their support rise significantly on election day. Brown captured the nomination, increasing his support by 10 points (51%). Mizeur hiked her margin by seven points (22%). But Gansler – who did not respond to the death-with-dignity survey – gained only two points (24%).

“Death with dignity is a winning issue everywhere it’s polled. It garners majority support among voters across the political spectrum,” said Compassion & Choices Chief Program Officer Mickey MacIntyre. “Voters support it because it ensures that the government will not interfere in very intimate, personal family decisions about end-of-life care.”

Brown’s and Mizeur’s support of death-with-dignity legislation is the most recent evidence of savvy candidates strategically using death with dignity as a winning campaign issue. Candidates are following their hearts … and the polls.

Last February, while serving as Connecticut state representative, Gary Holder-Winfield won a special election for a state Senate seat after speaking eloquently on the campaign trail about how watching his mother’s end-of-life suffering led him to support a death-with-dignity bill. He defeated a candidate who said he would vote against the legislation.

“Going through that and watching her suffer changed my perspective,” Senator Holder-Winfield told The New Haven Independent. “The whole time she was in pain. I’d go see her – sometimes she would cry the whole time.”

“Death with dignity is a Winning Election Issue

Increasingly, candidates are campaigning – and winning – on a death-with-dignity platform.

Connecticut State Senator Gary Holder-Winfield

Deputy Governor Anthony Brown

Delegate Heather Mizeur

“I watched my mother actually at some points beg for death.”

– Senator Gary Holder-Winfield
In 2010, Vermont gubernatorial candidate Peter Shumlin promised to pass a death-with-dignity law.

“I have been a sponsor of this legislation for multiple years,” Shumlin said. “As governor, I would make this a top priority and in my State of the State address would ask the Legislature to take this civil rights issue up and pass it.”

Shumlin won the governorship.

In 2012, a poll showed 74 percent of Vermont voters favored allowing a mentally competent adult who is dying of a terminal disease and in extreme pain to choose to end his or her life in a humane and dignified way. After the poll was released, a bipartisan group of state legislators defeated a bill that would have undone the 2009 Montana Supreme Court ruling in Baxter v. Montana that the state’s Green Mountain State became the fourth to legalize death with dignity, but the first to do it via legislative action, thanks to bipartisan support.

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Following this victory, Compassion & Choices Montana Campaign Manager Emily Bentley won a seat on the Missoula City Council, after she proudly noted her work for C&C in her official campaign biography. The issue of end-of-life choice struck close to Emily’s home last year. Her father suffered a sudden cardiac arrest while riding a bicycle. He was unconscious with no heartbeat when he was found on the side of the road, and remained in a coma for three weeks. Her father had spoken with her mother about his wishes.

“That was the first time I started thinking about the circle of life,” Emily said. “But I didn’t know, and it got me thinking about my wishes. Thinking about the baby [expected, at the time], making sure we have a will and everything.”

In other words, death with dignity is not only a winning issue, but a humanitarian one.

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The push for death with dignity in California launches from two initial centers of activity: San Mateo and Santa Barbara Counties. In both, the C&C California team is working on three fronts in this preliminary phase of grassroots activities. The first step is recruiting and engaging new volunteers, the backbone of any campaign. To that end, in late June C&C hosted community meetings where residents could meet like-minded neighbors and campaign staff, and learn how to help. At a Los Angeles event, the 40-plus guests heard from Jeanne Phillips, aka Dear Abby, about why her personal and professional experiences made her a vocal advocate for death with dignity. Second, C&C is asking city and county governing bodies to pass resolutions supporting death with dignity; campaign staff has already met with public officials and made initial connections. The third strategy is to raise awareness and visibility on our campaign through newspaper articles and other media, as well as vigorous online community-building.

California is a big state, and C&C has mapped a smart plan to ensure all its residents, including its 8.6 million baby boomers, have end-of-life choices. There are opportunities for Californians throughout the state to move this campaign forward. Call us at 800.247.7421 to get started!

COLORADO

Talk about the power of one: Suddenly, we expect a death-with-dignity bill to be introduced in Colorado’s legislature next year, and we are getting ready to see it through. A powerful op-ed written by a Denver man, dying from ALS, caught his elected representative’s attention. State Rep. Lois Court promised Charles Selsberg before he died that she would look into legislation, noting her own mother had suffered a long and painful death. Additional lawmakers, including Rep. Joann Ginal, who is working with Rep. Court, are also expressing support. To ensure the bill gets traction, C&C has retained communications and lobbying experts in Denver, and is hitting major events like the Salute to Seniors at the Colorado Convention Center – where 183 new volunteers signed up to help!

CONNECTICUT

Connecticut pioneered the remarkably compelling Six-Words Portrait Project, becoming a model for other states (see Massachusetts entry for details). Now Connecticut is leading the way again, with its “Ask the Question” campaign, which enlists supporters to ask political candidates about their position on death with dignity. Also on the electoral front, the Connecticut team partnered with the state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers to include a question about aid in dying on the group’s candidate questionnaire. Public outreach also continues, with one enthusiastic supporter securing a spot at a monthly street fair in Willimantic. Given the thousands who attend the fair every summer, C&C expects rapid growth in northeastern Connecticut.

IOWA

C&C Vermont Director Linda Waite-Simpson visited the Iowa chapter’s annual meeting in May (Waite-Simpson had one busy summer!). She talked about how the legislature passed the Vermont law. Iowa is also launching a new local group in Iowa City.

Keep up with all that’s happening:

Like us on Facebook
Follow us on Twitter (@compandchoices)
Sign up for our monthly e-newsletter at info@CompassionAndChoices.org
MARYLAND

In Maryland, death with dignity became a political issue when Democratic gubernatorial candidate Heather Mizeur expressed support for it as part of her health policy platform. C&C followed up with outreach asking other candidates to take a stand for end-of-life choice. Meanwhile, staffers from C&C’s Washington, D.C., office traveled to Maryland to forge connections at two key events, a Senior Fair sponsored by Maryland Congresswoman Donna Edwards and a luncheon, also attended by sponsors, for the Governor’s Leadership in Aging Awards.

MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts is moving ahead with its Six-Words Portrait Project, modeled on Connecticut’s. Twenty-six Massachusetts citizens have crafted their own six-word statements on why they support death with dignity, and all will sit for photo shoots so their pictures accompany their words. The individuals involved include faith leaders, physicians, business people and several Massachusetts lawmakers who support death-with-dignity legislation.

MINNESOTA

Minneapolis hosted the annual National Conference of State Legislators in August, and C&C representatives were there to talk about our issues with this important group. C&C sent Vermont State Representative and C&C Vermont State Director Linda Waite-Simpson to the conference to champion Vermont’s death-with-dignity law as a model for other states. Thanks go to the C&C Minnesota chapter for staffing the table and educating lawmakers on end-of-life issues.

MONTANA

Montana has big political news! First, supporters have registered a PAC called Montanans for Death With Dignity in order to support candidates who back end-of-life choice – and oppose those who don’t. Also, the state’s Democratic Party voted to renew their commitment to end-of-life choice with a plank in their party platform despite the presence of opponents at the Party’s annual convention. On the healthcare front, C&C is working with doctors on large and small scales, from the state family practice medical conference to individual practices, to make sure physicians are prepared to talk with their patients about end-of-life choices. A statewide ad campaign added hundreds of new supporters over the summer.

OREGON

The state with the first death-with-dignity law is also home to a large C&C office. The entire Oregon-based team is delighted that Barbara Mancini has agreed to speak at the October fundraising event. After being unjustly prosecuted for allegedly handing her dying father his morphine, Mancini – a nurse – is now a passionate advocate for end-of-life choice. C&C is also launching the Oregon Access Campaign to make sure we’re doing everything possible to help Oregonians understand how the law works and how to access it.

NEW JERSEY

The movement for death with dignity in New Jersey saw a breakthrough in June when the key committee in the State Assembly passed an aid-in-dying bill in an 8-4 vote. C&C packed the hearing room with supporters wearing the signature green My Life, My Death, My Choice stickers and made sure three powerful witnesses testified. Lawmakers on the Health and Senior Services Committee heard from Debra Dunn, a registered nurse who described her husband’s painful death from pancreatic cancer, calling his final months “torture.” Delores Lewis, a politically active advocate for seniors in Newark, told the Committee that her experiences with seniors – and losing both of her own sons to ravaging diseases – brought her to support death with dignity. C&C’s Chief Program Officer Mickey MacIntyre also testified, and shared his story of trying to comfort so many friends as they succumbed to HIV/AIDS. The petitions, the phone calls and citizen lobbying that helped move the bill in June will continue through the summer; Assemblyman John Burzichelli wants a full floor vote on his death-with-dignity bill after Labor Day.

NEW MEXICO

Following the January court ruling in Morris v. New Mexico, protecting aid in dying in New Mexico’s Bernalillo County, C&C is again working with the state ACLU to monitor the legislative landscape for bills that could set back that vital ruling. C&C advocates remain energized as court appeals proceed, continuing their efforts to educate the public and doctors about aid in dying.

“How I die is my choice.”

“Dignity in life. Dignity in death.”

“My life, my choice, not yours.”

Six-word project statements in Massachusetts
National Programs Update

Compelling Video Features C&C Volunteers With Disabilities Advocating for End-of-Life Autonomy

In July Compassion & Choices heralded the 24th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), one of the nation’s most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation.

Members of the disability community comprise some of Compassion & Choices’ most outspoken and influential advocates. Hugh Gallagher, paralyzed from polio as a teenager in the 1950s, was a disability-rights pioneer as well as influential proponent of end-of-life choice who served on our board of directors. In his honor, our Hugh Gallagher Award is given annually to a supporter who has been the most effective in communicating to diverse groups the importance of better care and options at the end of life.

Dustin Hankinson, recipient of the Hugh Gallagher Award in 2011, lives with Duchenne muscular dystrophy and has fought for the rights of persons with disabilities for over a decade as well as actively promoted bills to keep death with dignity legal in Montana. Supporter Sara Myers, who received statewide recognition for discussing the painful death she’ll face from ALS — or Lou Gehrig’s disease — at a 2013 Connecticut legislative hearing, appears with Dustin in a lovely video C&C produced to celebrate the ADA anniversary.

“Compassion & Choices shares the goal of the Americans with Disabilities Act of increasing autonomy and expanding options for all people,” said Compassion & Choices President Barbara Coombs Lee. Dustin summarizes the debate this way: “Death with dignity is just a natural conclusion to a life with dignity. No one else can be us, so no one else can make that decision.”

You can view the video at www.bit.ly/24ada.

Campaign to End Unwanted Medical Treatment Goes to the Hill

In June the Campaign to End Unwanted Medical Treatment hosted its first event to be held on Capitol Hill — a luncheon talk from Congressman Earl Blumenauer of Oregon. Wearing his famous bowtie and signature bicycle lapel pin, the congressman recounted the fate of the end-of-life consultation provision in healthcare reform legislation. He told the packed room in the Cannon House Office Building that his amendment to the Affordable Care Act to reimburse doctors for talking with Medicare patients about advance planning had bipartisan support in the House, despite its “death panel” moniker.

Unfortunately, the provision was dropped during horse trading in the Senate. This session Rep. Blumenauer has introduced a stand-alone bill, the Personalize Your Care Act of 2013, which does the same thing. He also referred to Compassion & Choices’ poll and the finding that 95 percent of older Americans say it’s very important to them to have their end-of-life wishes honored.
Strategic Outreach Builds Our Movement

Compassion & Choices staff and volunteers strive to connect with and engage diverse audiences to increase the momentum for end-of-life choice for all Americans.

This spring and summer, Washington, D.C.-based staff spoke at several conferences of leading African-American professional organizations. The networking included:

» presenting to nearly 100 physician delegates at the National Medical Association Annual Colloquium;

» participating in a briefing on the aging African-American LGBT community at the National Black Justice Coalition;

» giving a presentation on advance planning at the May meeting of Kappa Alpha Psi, Washington, D.C., chapter;

» serving on a panel at the National Organization of Black Elected Legislative (NOBEL) Women Conference; and

» appearing as sponsors and participants in the National Association of Social Workers convention in July.

Compassion & Choices national and campaign staff routinely reach out to another key group for collaboration: social workers. These professionals have been important in our campaign states, especially New Jersey and Connecticut. C&C exhibited at the National Association of Social Workers convention in July.

“Diversifying our support base by educating a variety of audiences is a valuable opportunity and a true testament to C&C’s commitment to ensuring that all Americans are prepared to make informed end-of-life choices.”

- C&C Regional Campaign & Outreach Manager

Brandi Alexander

LGBT Community Active in End-of-Life Choice

Compassion & Choices staff and volunteers joined participants in Pride events in key locations this summer. More than 100 new supporters signed up in June at Asbury Park Pride in New Jersey, one of C&C’s hottest campaign states. Our involvement deepened our ties with other allied organizations, including the ACLU, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalists and National Association of Social Workers, who also participated. The outreach continued at Newark and Jersey City Pride celebrations later in the summer.

In Butte, Montana, our campaign grew by more than 70 due to outreach at and before the Pride parade. C&C will build on this enthusiasm, likely with a panel on issues LGBT elders face.

In Massachusetts, C&C reached participants in Pride events in Provincetown, Worcester and Boston.

Supporters recognize the strong similarities between the end-of-life choice and LGBT rights movements. Both seek to expand personal liberty, dignity and freedom for people to make choices about their bodies and their lives, according to their own values, beliefs and life experiences.

Nurse Unjustly Charged in Father’s Death Regains Her Job

Barbara Mancini secured her freedom when unjust “assisted suicide” charges were dropped in February after the death of her terminally ill father. In late April, Barbara’s life normalized and she returned to her ER nursing job.

“Compassion & Choices waged a national media campaign and submitted an amicus brief to the court in her defense. My first day back at work went well,” reports Barbara. “My colleagues were all welcoming, helpful and supportive ... It almost seemed like I never left.”

“The scars of her traumatic ordeal are still there, but she is persevering,” said Barbara’s husband, Joe Mancini. “Our personal lives have changed for the better.”

“My colleagues were all welcoming, helpful and supportive ...”
national programs update

C&C Explores Respecting Choices Program

Compassion & Choices’ End-of-Life Care Managers Pamela Edgar and Marlene Tumlin recently completed two phases of Gundersen Health System’s internationally lauded “Respecting Choices” advance planning education program. Based in La Crosse, Wisconsin, Respecting Choices stands out in the global healthcare discussion for its astounding results: 96 percent of people who die in its pilot city not only have completed advance directives – nearly double the national average – but medical staff honor the plans 98 percent of the time. C&C staff will seek ways to integrate aspects of the curriculum into their own work.

“There’s much that we can borrow,” says Marlene about the program. Added Pam, “It’s really about addressing the barriers to engaging in advance healthcare planning and making sure people have the knowledge to start the process, the tools and the skills to have the conversation with loved ones. Because it’s not just filling out papers or checking a box and then you’re done. It truly is an ongoing process.”

For info on making your end-of-life plans, follow the steps in our Good to Go Guide, www.bit.ly/ccgood2go, or call 800.247.7421.

Respecting Choices®
ADVANCE CARE PLANNING

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state spotlight

Vermont

Vermont was the first state to pass a death-with-dignity law through the legislature, and that law celebrated its first anniversary in May.

The law suffered no setbacks during its first year; not a single effort to water it down passed the legislature, though many such amendments were introduced. To mark the one-year anniversary, C&C’s Vermont director, Linda Waite-Simpson, published an op-ed in the Rutland Herald. She wrote, “The law is working exactly as its primary advocates, Patient Choices Vermont and Compassion & Choices, predicted it would: slowly but surely.” Patient Choices Vermont President Dick Walters also penned an op-ed, for the Burlington Free Press. In it, Walters revealed that he himself had recently received a lung cancer diagnosis. “Like so many Vermonters,” he wrote, “I have peace of mind knowing that if some day in the future my suffering becomes intolerable, I will have choice and control.”

To protect his and all Vermonters’ end-of-life choice, the C&C Vermont team is consistently getting the word out to the medical community and the public about how the law works. Waite-Simpson attended a Vermont conference of hospice and palliative care professionals, for example, and explained how C&C can help connect patients with doctors willing to participate in the law. When a law is new, outreach and education by C&C volunteers and staff make sure it is implemented properly and is truly available to eligible residents of the state.
Five Questions for
Olympia Dukakis

Acclaimed actress, director, producer, teacher, lecturer, activist and mother of three, Olympia Dukakis also lends her warmth and wit to Compassion & Choices’ board of advisors. She took time to speak with us a week before her 83rd birthday.

Q: Your first career was as a physical therapist. What compelled you to return to Boston University to study performing arts and pursue acting?

A: The truth is I discovered I wanted to do theater when I was a sophomore. My family didn’t have money for me to make the change, though, so my mom was very clear that I would have to pay for it myself. I realized I could get a scholarship for my last two years to become a physical therapist, and what I then owed was two years of working the polio epidemics. So I did that. Then I saved my money, and I went back to graduate school.
five questions

Q: Did your portrayal of the mother of a terminal AIDS patient who seeks aid in dying in The Event color your views on end-of-life choice?

A: I’ve always felt that people should decide what they want if they can. I think that’s just an extension of self-defining. You’re not only going to choose how you want to live and what you value; you have the possibility of choosing how you want to die.

I watched my mother die. She had Alzheimer’s. That was a real awakening also. I had a doctor actually tell me when her heart was failing that he wanted to do all these things, and he needed my brother’s and my permission. I said no, that she didn’t want to be kept alive like that. He said, “Well, you and your brother will be killing your mother.” This is what he said to me! There’s no humanity in that. And I said, “I know what my mother wants.” We had all the papers. They were on file. And this guy is telling me that we’re killing my mother. These people with very strong beliefs, religious or otherwise, they can do what they want; but why don’t they leave the rest of us alone?

Q: Was working during the polio epidemics as challenging as it sounds?

A: It was an extraordinary experience because I had never seen suffering like that. Then I got a case of polio, nonparalytic polio, but I recovered. I saw a lot of people die and all the pain they went through, and I had never seen death before. It was quite an awakening. And of course it never left me.

Q: Throughout your quite frankly incredible theater and film career, you’ve played some very memorable characters. Which is most unlike the real you? And is that more difficult, or more fun?

A: I used to say that when I grow up I want to be Anna Madrigal, my character from the series Tales of the City, because she wasn’t at the mercy of things. She had found what mattered to her, and she pursued that, and there was a generosity about her – she wasn’t jockeying for position. I wanted that in my life. At least at the time I didn’t feel I had the kind of equanimity, the self-assurance that she had. She had been through so much. She knew what was important and not important to her, and everything else she just dropped. She was self-defining. Playing roles like that is always more fun because you get to access things that are more latent in you.

Q: You’ve won an Oscar, published a best-selling autobiography, have your own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame … what are you working to accomplish now?

A: I have a bunch of projects that I’m interested in that have to do with the patriarchy, and I’m mentoring a lot of people, mostly women. There’s a documentary being done right now about me, believe it or not, and I’m teaching quite a bit. I’ve also devised a workshop about how to approach the Greeks for American actors, which I’m really excited about. A lot of things still keep me bouncing around. The beat goes on.

Q: No organization has addressed the right to a compassionate death with more wisdom, caring and effectiveness than Compassion & Choices. They have my full-hearted support now and will certainly have it testamentary-wise when I complete my full life circle.

– Barbara Meislin, aka “The Purple Lady”
San Francisco, CA

Create a LEGACY

A bequest to Compassion & Choices lets you establish your wishes today while retaining assets during your lifetime.

For more information on this and other giving strategies, contact us at plannedgiving@CompassionAndChoices.org or call 800.247.7421, ext. 2159.
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Spread the word about end-of-life choice by sharing this issue. Leave a copy in your doctor’s waiting room, or order more to send to family and friends by e-mailing: info@CompassionAndChoices.org

Erin Marshall
New Mexico Campaign Manager