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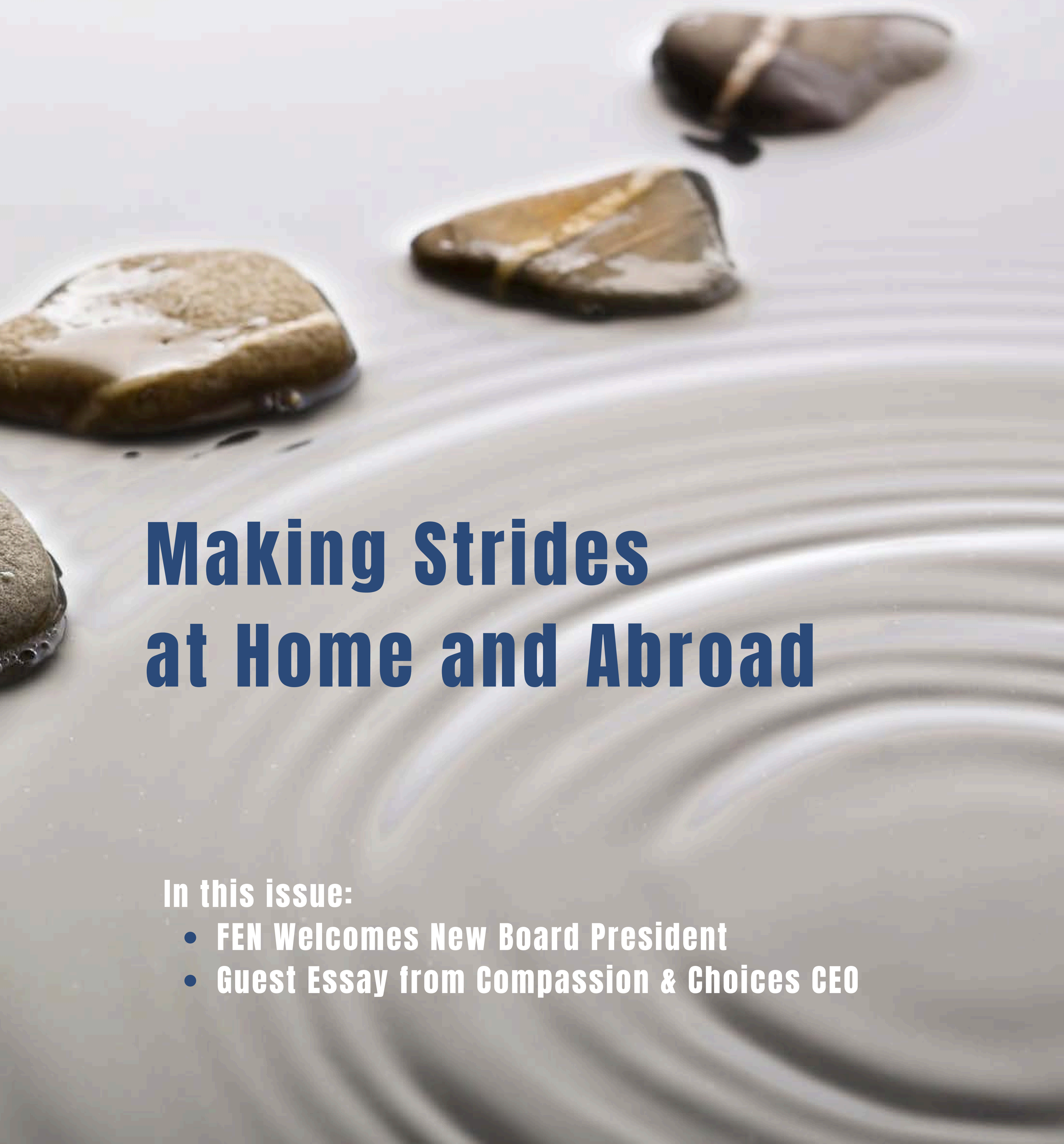
Final Exit Network



Making Strides at Home and Abroad

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From the Board President

Passing the Gavel

Final Exit Network (FEN)

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I am excited to announce that Anita Winsor has been elected as the new president of the Final Exit Network Board, effective January 1, 2026. She has been a very involved and productive board member for over five years and will be a wonderful complement to our new executive director, Michelle Witte, who joined FEN this summer. Together they will lead our organization to the next level in the right to die movement.

I have had six rewarding years as president, seeing the hiring of our first executive director, the hiring of our first dedicated person to manage our guide program, and our successful first external audit. Our organization is in the best financial and organizational shape it has ever been in. I have enjoyed getting to know many members and donors. And I have learned that our volunteers and supporters are the most compassionate and caring people in the world. My experiences as a guide and board member have made my life better and my acceptance of dying and death much easier.

My last contribution as president is our improving relationship with Compassion & Choices. There was a time when C&C did not feel comfortable mentioning us in a positive manner. I worked with Kim Callanan and now with Kevin Díaz, the current CEO, to find ways we can work together. I invited Kevin to submit the included article for our magazine describing their new service, Compassion Legal.

Compassion & Choices is one of the most important US organizations in the right to die movement. We support their efforts to expand the medical aid in dying laws across the country. We recommend their advance directive for dementia. I hope our organizations can continue to work together as we try to expand access to end-of-life choices. Collaboration is a vital strength among groups working to make dying with dignity a choice for everyone in the US.

Finally, I want to thank our board members, volunteers, and members for all the support they have given me over the past six years. It has been amazing, wonderful, and appreciated. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Brian Ruder

Brian Ruder
Board President

As this publication goes to press, we honor the life and impact of Mr. Ludwig A. Minelli, founder of DIGNITAS in Switzerland. FEN remains committed to upholding the values of dignity, respect, and personal freedom that defined his life's work and will highlight his legacy in the right to die movement in the next issue.

From the Executive Director

Building on a Strong Foundation

Loving the San Francisco sun and palm trees!

Stepping into an organization as a new leader can often feel like setting out on an unfamiliar road—full of promise, but not without its rough patches. I'm delighted to say that my journey with FEN, while hilly at moments, has been remarkably smooth so far. That is entirely due to the dedication, integrity, and heart that staff, volunteers, and supporters have invested in this organization for many years.

Mary Ewert has been extraordinarily generous with her time and guidance throughout the transition. Staff and board members have welcomed me with warmth and encouragement. Our finances are strong thanks to the loyalty and generosity of our members and donors. And volunteers, trusted partners, and longtime advocates have shared invaluable insights into FEN's history and its evolving dreams for the future. I am humbled by the strength of the foundation they—and you—have built in pursuit of our mission to educate and support those who want choice in dying.

Of course, the road ahead still climbs. Ensuring that every person can access their legal end-of-life options remains a challenge many of us must confront together. This year, our FEN team found itself climbing once more, facing a new legal test around free speech and death with dignity. As I write, the outcome is not yet final or public, but I can say this with great pride: Our Exit Guide Program remains intact, principled, and strong. FEN will continue offering accurate information, a compassionate presence, and steady support to individuals and their families as they navigate the end of life.

Enjoying the fall splendor aboard Amtrak to Portland.

Everywhere I traveled during these first months, I witnessed firsthand how deeply FEN's commitment to ethics and responsibility runs. Our structure and practices are grounded in good faith, shaped by rigorous safeguards, and fully aligned with the law. In moments when people may feel uncertain or vulnerable, FEN provides clarity, integrity, and unwavering care.

I also learned something essential along the way: We at FEN believe wholeheartedly that open discussion and education about choice in dying are not only lawful but vital to a free and informed society. End-of-life issues can stir strong emotions, but we do not step back from the conversation. Instead, we invite it. We offer factual, legally grounded information so individuals can understand their rights and make decisions with dignity.

~continued on next page

A peek at the Potomac and Kennedy Center.

Thank you for welcoming me into the FEN family, and for your steadfast support as we continue our sometimes-uphill journey to ensure that no one reaches the end of life without dignity, compassion, or choice. Your commitment makes everything we do possible. I look forward to what we will build together in 2026, strengthening the foundation of autonomy, service, education, and caring that defines FEN.

Warmly,

Michelle Witte

Michelle Witte
Executive Director

P.S. If you've not yet had the opportunity to donate to our year-end appeal, please take a moment to do so. Our path ahead will need all the support we can muster to climb the hills on the horizon. Your strength in giving equals our strength to serve people at the end of their lives. Thank you for using the enclosed envelope or donating at www.finalexitnetwork.org.

Michelle's Journeys

Our new Executive Director has hit the ground running, traveling from coast to coast to meet the volunteers, members, and donors who make Final Exit Network's mission possible. These visits have taken her into living rooms and to community gatherings, where she's listened closely to people's experiences, shared updates about FEN's work, and strengthened the relationships that sustain our organization. These photos offer a glimpse into that journey and a celebration of the vibrant, committed community Michelle is proud to serve.

(*Top Row L-R)*: Michelle and FEN board member Randee Laikind in Massachussetts; with FEN volunteer Pam Bankert in Cape Cod; Michelle and FEN board member Russell Bates in Los Angeles. (*Bottom Row L-R)*: FEN members and volunteers meeting in Portland, OR; Michelle and FEN volunteer Jim Van Buskirk at an event he hosted in San Francisco; with author Dan Zimberoff in Niagara Falls, Canada.

Ethics at the Center

How FEN Ensures Transparency, Safety, and Integrity in End-of-Life Support

BY MICHELLE WITTE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In the evolving landscape of end-of-life choice, one value remains constant: the need for transparent, ethical organizations that guide individuals with accuracy and compassion. FEN stands among those committed to this standard, shaping programs around the belief that autonomy must be fully informed and protected by strong safeguards.

FEN's Commitment to Comprehensive and Honest Information

Education is central to FEN's mission and we offer it with candor and balance. Our workshops include a full discussion of available end-of-life options, including medical aid in dying (MAID), voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED), traveling to Switzerland to access medical aid in dying (Swiss Option), and FEN's Exit Guide Program.

In addition to sharing options, FEN presentations stress the legal and ethical boundaries that shape each. For example, in states that provide a pathway to MAID, FEN makes sure attendees understand the law's parameters. Our presentations also intentionally avoid presenting content that could endanger participants. This element reinforces FEN's belief that safety is a critical element of education.

FEN rigorously evaluates all applicants to the Exit Guide Program. Before a client is accepted, FEN's Medical Review Committee, composed of doctors and other medical experts, evaluates each application. In addition, at least two trained reviewers speak directly with applicants, exploring their choice, motivation, and understanding of consequences.

We prevent conflict of interest by ensuring that no one involved in the evaluations has a personal, financial, or institutional connection to the prospective client. This rule is designed to eliminate pressure, bias, or the appearance of influence.

Training Grounded in Professional Standards

FEN invests heavily in its volunteer training. Each trainee receives professional literature, such as the seminal 2007 paper *Assessment of Patients' Competence to Consent to Treatment* and instruction in how to ask the kinds of probing yet respectful questions that reveal a client's mental capacity and intentionality. The training reinforces the core values of autonomy, safety, and informed consent.

One of the most compassionate aspects of FEN's ethical framework is its focus on minimizing trauma for loved ones and first responders. Clients considering a chosen death are encouraged to leave a clear written explanation of their decision, their reasoning, and their method. FEN also assists clients in planning for a designated individual to notify authorities, ensuring that no unprepared person encounters the death unexpectedly.

At a time when end-of-life options remain both deeply personal and legally complex, FEN serves as a model of how organizations can operate with transparency and integrity. Our policies ensure that individuals receive accurate information, that decisions are thoroughly vetted, and that every action is grounded in safety, legality, and compassion.

Through these practices, FEN honors not only personal autonomy but also the broader ethical obligations owed to families and communities. In doing so, FEN sets a standard for what responsible end-of-life support should look like: open, honest, and unwaveringly ethical.

A Partnership in Purpose

Reflections on Working with Brian

BY MARY EWERT, RETIRED FEN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Having just recently begun my retirement journey from FEN, I am delighted to welcome Brian Ruder, FEN's outgoing board president, to the club. It gives me the perfect opportunity to reflect on the time we spent working together as FEN began its shift from volunteer-led to today's staff-driven model.

In 2018 the FEN job post seeking an executive director tempted me out of retirement, into an interview with Janis Landis (then board president), Brian (then vice president), and Cameron Linen (former board member), and ultimately to acceptance of the job offer. Shortly after I accepted, Brian phoned to make sure I hadn't changed my mind. I assured him that I had not and that I looked forward to the liberation of working at a job that was more than a job, it was a calling.

I knew Janis from prior FEN member meetings in Chicago and felt very comfortable working with her as president. But I was a bit uncertain about what to expect from Brian. I would need to gain clarity on his vision. My prior positions were with larger organizations that included whole departments for finance, meeting planning, and other executive and administrative needs. Brian's response to one of my first questions quickly brought home the "many hats" nature of the job. When I asked about expectations for office hours, he smiled. This was not a regular job with regular hours.

One of the first ways Brian made his mark was his insistence that meetings be brief and to the point. Brian can be ephemeral on Zoom calls — there one minute, and then, poof, he's gone! A bit like Joe Friday on Dragnet…he's a fan of "Just the facts, ma'am"!

Brian's ambitious vision for FEN soon took shape — to enhance FEN's credibility in the right to die universe and beyond. First stop, revamping the FEN website. He wanted a clean look providing information but not clutter. And he did not want purple to be the color theme! He suggested that we hire a company experienced in nonprofit website development. This was the first of many suggestions that led to positive change for our organization. My main memory of that experience was choosing a logo. There were several to choose from and, unsurprisingly, just as many opinions about what to choose. Brian nudged me to decide, reminding me that changes could always be made. The important thing was to move the process along. Almost a decade later, that FEN logo remains in place.

Another step toward a professional website involved professional board photos. I chose a local acquaintance who was honing her portrait photography skills to come to a Chicago meeting where all board members would be present. The photographer moved anything but swiftly, working with each subject to bring out the best in their photos. This, of course, conflicted with Brian's need for speed in any meeting setting! I assured him that I understood his desire to move quickly but also reminded him that the photographer worked carefully with each subject to put them at ease. When the photos were delivered, everyone on the board, including Brian, was thrilled with the outcome.

Throughout my time with FEN, Brian was a steady hand and a creative thinker. I like to think that Brian's strengths combined with mine to produce a wonderful synergy that led FEN forward. I can't wait to see where FEN's incoming president, Anita Winsor, and Executive Director Michelle Witte will lead the organization. I'm confident they will build on Brian's legacy and move the organization forward in a most positive way.

Thank you, Brian, for working with me over more than six years. Now pass that gavel on and enjoy a bit of well-earned free time!

The 8pm Call: How Brian Turned Challenges into Cheers

BY JANIS LANDIS, FEN PAST PRESIDENT

Brian and I have shared some stressful times at FEN. Personnel issues, budget decisions, and organizational challenges often filled the horizon. We even literally had a toxic cloud form in Chicago one year during our annual meeting. And our plans to have our spouses join us for a celebratory dinner in New York were thwarted by COVID.

But our antidote was our 8pm (Eastern) phone calls to discuss problems. Brian's sharp analytical skills made short work of each issue as we ran down the list. And his equally sharp sense of humor always had me laughing despite the obstacles we faced.

I do want to note that Brian always ended the call with a promise to buy me a drink or two at the annual meeting. This is, as far as I know, the only item Brian has yet to complete. Perhaps it's his Machiavellian way of keeping me coming to the meetings.

Cheers to Brian! Thank you for your steadfast leadership.

Photos, opposite page: Brian and Mary at the April 2025 board meeting; Janis and Brian deep in discussion. This page, above left: Brian on the set of the FEN 20th anniversary video production; below: a group photo taken at the April 2024 board meeting.

Shaped by Story, Committed to Service:

Anita Winsor Begins Her Tenure as FEN Board President

BY SYLVIA LINDMAN, VOLUNTEER

Anita Winsor has invited guests to dinner parties to discuss death and legacy. Her two children are well aware of her end-of-life wishes. She has been an avid supporter of right to die organizations in the United States and Canada. “Thinking about mortality and how to die well has been a priority for me,” she said. She was trained as an Exit Guide for FEN and has served on its board of directors since 2021. In January, she officially begins her term as board president.

Anita welcomes the opportunity to help FEN fulfill its mission: To educate and support those who want choice in dying. She explained, “FEN plays a unique role as the only place where someone with life-limiting diseases can learn about the full range of end-of-life options available to them. The feedback we get is that people gain comfort and peace of mind knowing they have options. They have a better sense of control, whatever they decide to do or not do.”

Her convictions come from personal experience. “Having gone down a long, sad road with several family members who suffered from dementia, I can identify with the people out there who might be looking for an organization like FEN and would benefit from it,” she said. “I’m the person we’re looking to get the message out to.”

When Anita’s grandmother began exhibiting signs of dementia, she repeatedly asked Anita for help to die. “We were very close and, knowing how independent she had always been, I understood the despondency she was feeling,” Anita said. “It made a huge impression on me, watching her suffer and not being able to help her.”

When her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s 30 years later, she suffered for over a decade and finally used VSED (voluntarily stopping eating and drinking) when she forgot how to swallow and required a feeding tube. “We felt such guilt about her final years,” Anita said. “That was not what she had wanted. We felt we had let her down, but had no idea about how she could have had it differently.”

Knowing the prevalence of dementia in her family, Anita felt she owed it to herself to investigate end-of-life options. That’s when she happened upon FEN—and knew she had come to the right place. “FEN was welcoming and personal, and provided options for people who may be suffering longer than the six-month window that is required for medical aid in dying,” she said. She recognized this information could be important for many others in a similar situation and felt motivated to get involved with FEN’s mission.

FEN continues to grow its membership, services, and outreach. Working with new Executive Director Michelle Witte, Anita intends to build on this momentum, providing information to larger audiences, strengthening and sustaining its Exit Guide program, and expanding awareness of FEN’s dementia-focused services and programs. “As we move to an executive-director run organization, Anita has just the right temperament and skills to make the transition work,” said outgoing Board President Brian Ruder.

Anita is a philanthropist with experience in nonprofit management, strategic partner development, and fundraising. She is a member of Grantmakers in Aging and the Global Philanthropist Circle and serves on the board of the William H. Donner Foundation and the Donner Canadian Foundation.

She also has a background in international relations. She has worked at the US Agency for International Development and the Pan American Development Foundation. She was a staff member on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives and a trade representative for the US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce. She holds a BA from Smith College and an MPhil from Cambridge University.

During her free time, Anita enjoys volunteering for Homeward Trails, an animal rescue group in Fairfax, VA, where she fosters dogs and often drives a van to bring animals from rural shelters to adoption fairs in the DC metro area. She is a passionate reader, with a Little Free Library in front of her house in Alexandria, VA.

One question to ask a loved one today:

What would bring you the most comfort in your final years?

Empowering People Through Knowledge and Compassion: It's What We Do at FEN

The end of life is a journey we all navigate, yet it's one of the least discussed parts of being human.

FEN works to change that by offering clear information, compassionate support, and a space where questions can be asked openly and without judgment. When people understand the choices available to them, they often describe feeling a sense of peace, even empowerment.

It isn't always about choosing a specific path; it's also about knowing you have one. For many, that knowledge alone reduces fear and brings comfort. No one should face these decisions in the dark, and FEN helps ensure they don't.

500K

The Good Death Society blog, which is produced weekly by FEN, has reached over 500,000 visitors since its inception. Do you subscribe? Learn more, sign up, or see past posts at thegooddeathsocietyblog.net

Guest Essay

Compassion Legal: Defending the Future of End-of-Life Care

BY KEVIN DÍAZ - CEO, COMPASSION & CHOICES

Note from FEN Board President Brian Ruder:

I want to thank Kevin Díaz, the CEO of Compassion & Choices, for sharing information on their new service, Compassion Legal. Compassion & Choices is one of the most important US organizations in the right to die movement. We support their efforts to expand the medical aid in dying laws across the country. We recommend many of their end-of-life tools, including their dementia values and priorities tool as well as their advance directive for dementia. I hope our organizations will continue to work together as we try to expand access to end-of-life choices.

Did you know there is now a first-of-its-kind, nonprofit law firm dedicated to protecting your end-of-life rights?

Compassion Legal, the End-of-Life Justice Center at Compassion & Choices, has expert staff attorneys and *pro bono* partners who work at the intersection of law, medicine, and patient-directed care to ensure:

- Your decisions are honored and fulfilled.
- Your options are protected and expanded.
- Your care is transformed and secured.

At Compassion & Choices, we believe everyone deserves to approach life's final chapter with dignity, clarity, and control. When challenges arise, having the right legal support can make all the difference in ensuring your wishes are honored.

Whether you are navigating your own care, advocating for a loved one, or seeking to improve healthcare for all, Compassion Legal is here to help. Our team pursues justice in the courts and beyond to safeguard high-quality, values-based end-of-life care.

With this year's launch of Compassion Legal, we're breaking new ground in courts across the country:

United Spinal v. Colorado

A patient, a physician, and a licensed professional counselor specializing in eating disorders joined Compassion & Choices Action Network in October in filing a motion to intervene and oppose a lawsuit seeking to invalidate Colorado's End-of-Life Options Act.

In filing their request, the proposed intervenors are taking a stand to protect the rights and dignity of Coloradans facing terminal illness. They are fighting to ensure the End-of-Life Options Act, approved by voters to give qualified individuals the freedom to make personal, compassionate choices at the end of life, remains firmly in place.

Koskenoja v. Whitmer

Koskenoja v. Whitmer challenges the constitutionality of a Michigan law that denies pregnant people who are incapacitated the right to refuse life-sustaining treatment. Michigan women, physicians, and patient advocates have joined together to file a lawsuit challenging a state law that denies pregnant people the ability to make important decisions about their end-of-life care. The lawsuit, filed by Compassion Legal, If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice, Perkins Coie LLP, and Mogill & Lemanski, PLLC, argues that Michigan's Pregnancy Exclusion violates the plaintiffs' rights as guaranteed in the Michigan State constitution, including their right to make reproductive and End-of-Life decisions.

Death Doulas Win in Indiana

On August 28, 2025, the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit ruled in *Richwine v. Matuszak* that death doulas in Indiana can continue their work regardless of state funeral home regulations. The court affirmed that doulas provide essential guidance and support for families, which is not the same service as funeral directors.

This victory came after the state attempted to shut down death doula provider Death Done Differently, LLC, run by Lauren Richwine, by claiming it needed a funeral home license. Compassion & Choices filed an amicus brief supporting Richwine and underscoring the unique role doulas play in patient-directed end-of-life care.

In finding that Indiana had violated Richwine's First Amendment rights, the Court reiterated the importance of death doula services: "Not everyone who experiences the death of a loved one will have a trusted companion to call for assistance and guidance on how to proceed."

Indiana has not yet announced whether it will appeal to the US Supreme Court.

If You Need Legal Assistance

If you have a legal case that involves the end-of-life rights of your loved ones and their healthcare access, please complete our legal intake form at compassionandchoices.org/legal-advocacy.

For urgent matters, call us directly at 503-943-6513. To support this initiative or learn more, please visit compassionandchoices.org.

Compassion
Legal

The End-of-Life Justice Center at compassion & choices

Encouraging Honest Conversations About Mortality

BY BRIAN RUDER, FEN BOARD PRESIDENT

Earlier this year, I received an invitation from Dane, a resident of Terwilliger Plaza, an upscale senior living community in downtown Portland, Oregon. The facility is known for its commitment to lifelong learning, but Dane had noticed one notable gap in its programming: open, honest conversations about mortality and end-of-life choices.

Having moved in 18 months earlier, Dane had established a group called "Mortality and Choices" to organize discussions and educational events focused on death and dying. His planning committee of five included Marcia Hofer, one of the founders of Better Exit in California.

When we first spoke, I mentioned that FEN has often found it challenging to gain access to senior living communities, which can be cautious about hosting discussions on topics like death and autonomy. Dane shared that the Institute for Health Care Improvement (IHI) had, as far back as 2010, emphasized the importance of realistic conversations about end-of-life care to help mitigate the unintended consequences of modern medicine. He assured me that Terwilliger Plaza's management supported programs exploring all available end-of-life options, and that residents had shown deep engagement with the topic.

The Mortality & Choices group meets monthly, featuring a formal presentation followed by an open discussion of the previous month's topic. Their sessions have covered the Oregon Death with Dignity Act, advance directives, and local hospice options, all aimed at helping residents make informed, compassionate, and realistic decisions about the end of life.

When I spoke to the group, I kept my presentation informal and conversational, inviting questions throughout rather than relying on slides. I shared stories of individuals who had exercised various end-of-life options, including those living with dementia, since I find that personal stories often resonate more deeply than facts alone.

The response was remarkable. Nearly eighty residents attended, fully engaged and eager to discuss these important issues. Their curiosity and thoughtfulness reinforced my belief that there is widespread interest in meaningful dialogue about mortality, especially regarding the challenges of dementia.

As I drove home, I reflected on how this model could be replicated elsewhere. Many senior living communities have residents ready for these conversations; they simply need a structure to begin. Final Exit Network's website offers a wealth of resources to help initiate discussions, and when the time is right, FEN can provide experienced speakers to help facilitate them. Indeed, if you are affiliated with a community that may benefit from a session presented by FEN, we encourage you to reach out to us at finalexitnetwork.org/news-events/speakers-bureau.

By fostering open, informed conversations, we can continue breaking down the silence that too often surrounds the end of life—and empower more people to face it with clarity, dignity, and choice.

The Global Momentum for Medical Aid in Dying

BY JANIS LANDIS, FEN BOARD MEMBER

"My body is my prison and I would be so obedient to the law, as not to break prison."

~John Donne

Although this quote is from a seventeenth century English Christian poet, for most of history, across continents and cultures, this sentiment has been widely accepted as both legal and religious doctrine. However, beginning in the twentieth century, courageous people began to challenge this belief. FEN co-founder Derek Humphry was among the first, but many other activists have stepped up and begun to chip away at that concept.

What are some updates in the US and globally on medical aid in dying (MAID)?

United States

Several months ago the **New York State** Legislature passed a MAID law. On December 17, 2025, New York Governor Hochul announced that she will sign a revised version developed with the sponsors and legislative leaders, which will be introduced when the Assembly and state Senate reconvene in January 2026.

In late October, the **Illinois** legislature passed The End-of-Life Options for Terminally Ill Patients Act (SB 1950), aka Deb's Law—which authorizes medical aid in dying for qualified terminally ill residents of Illinois. The bill was signed into law by Governor J.B. Pritzker on December 12, 2025. FEN's very own Ed Gogol and Mary Ewert were instrumental in working toward this bill.

An estimated seventy-four million people in the United States live in a jurisdiction that allows MAID, and another eighty-seven million reside in fourteen states where MAID is on the legislative agenda.

Those fourteen states may be slow to adopt MAID legislation, but this extended pause may provide an opportunity to look at the current standard model and make it more flexible. The strict provisions of the current US model require individuals to be six months from death to qualify for MAID. This limitation is why FEN remains so important: It is the only organization that considers individuals with neurological diseases such as dementia and Parkinson's as candidates for the Exit Guide Program. Applications from such individuals are becoming the leading category of chosen exits.

Global Updates

Change is in the air everywhere. **Canada** already has an extremely progressive aid in dying movement that permits euthanasia for those meeting medical requirements. In 2027, Canada will add severe intractable mental illness to its list of qualifying conditions.

There is progress elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere as well. Medical aid in dying is legal in **Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Uruguay**.

Worldwide, the movement is gaining momentum. **New Zealand** is now fully covered by MAID, and **all Australian states** (but not all territories) are covered.

Europe continues to add more MAID countries as well.

Portugal has passed a MAID law, though procedures remain to be implemented.

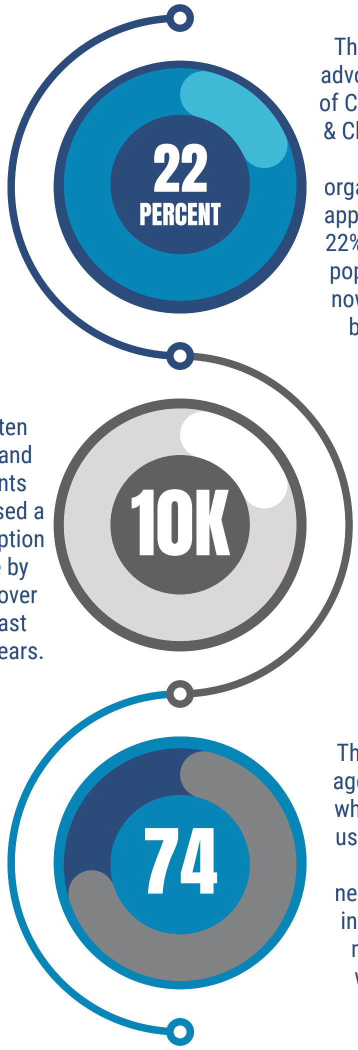
Spain has legalized euthanasia for the terminally ill.

In the **United Kingdom**, the British House of Commons has voted in favor of a bill to legalize assisted dying for terminally ill people, and the House of Lords is expected to follow suit. The bill gives mentally competent, terminally ill adults in England and Wales who have six months or less left to live the right to choose to end their lives with medical assistance.

France, too, is moving to legalize assisted dying. The lower house of the National Assembly passed a bill in May 2025 stating that the patient's illness does not need to be terminal in six months. Rather, the criteria is that the illness must cause “constant, unbearable physical or psychological suffering“ that cannot be addressed by medical treatment.

The work to be done remains daunting. But we and other partners in the right to die movement will continue our work until no one remains a prisoner of their body.

MAID in the USA



Through the advocacy work of Compassion & Choices and other organizations, approximately 22% of the US population is now covered by MAID.

Over ten thousand patients have used a prescription to die by MAID over the past thirty years.

The median age of those who elect to use MAID is 74, and nearly equal in terms of men and women.

Honoring Her Brother: Why One Donor Chooses to Give Monthly

When Anne’s brother Josh was diagnosed with Huntington’s disease, her family faced the relentless progression of a cruel and degenerative illness. Watching him suffer, Anne saw firsthand how few options exist for those who wish to end their lives peacefully and with dignity.

Final Exit Network became a source of compassion, understanding, and guidance during that devastating time. “You guys are awesome and made it possible for my brother, who was suffering miserably due to Huntington’s, to end his life on his terms,” Anne wrote to FEN. “Both our family as well as Josh’s large ‘friends’ family truly appreciate the work you do.”

In 2024, Anne decided to become a monthly donor, committing to sustain the organization that had supported her brother’s final choice. “I just went ahead and started a monthly donation,” she said, “and added a one-time gift to make up for the year so far.”

Anne’s generosity reflects the growing community of recurring donors who keep FEN’s mission strong month after month. These steady contributions provide the resources needed to answer calls for help, educate the public, and support the right to die with dignity.

Today, Anne takes comfort in knowing that her ongoing support helps others find peace and autonomy in their own time of need.

Recurring gifts, no matter the size, help ensure that Final Exit Network can continue to stand beside individuals and families when they need it most.

If you are interested in supporting FEN with a recurring donation, please visit finalexitnetwork.org/donate.

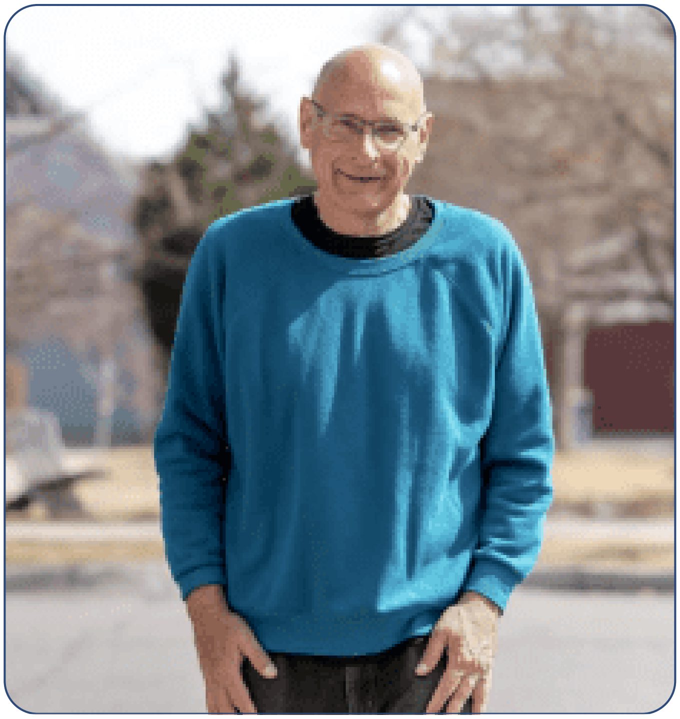
About the photo: Josh (center, in the green jacket) shares a moment of levity with members of his chosen family—close friends who deeply supported him through his end-of-life journey.

Living with Dementia: Wally Klatch's Journey of Resilience and Choice

BY STEVE GURNEY
FOUNDER, POSITIVE AGING COMMUNITY
PUBLISHER, POSITIVE AGING SOURCEBOOK

This is the fourth installment of this series, which first appeared in the Fall 2024 FEN magazine. Wally was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment and is sharing his journey with early-stage dementia.

This piece is reprinted with permission from the October 2025 issue of Positive Aging.



Wally Klatch is candid about his experience living with dementia—a diagnosis that has transformed his life but not his resolve to live meaningfully. Diagnosed in Israel and now residing in Colorado, Klatch aims to destigmatize dementia and spark open conversations about end-of-life choices. His story underscores the possibility of purpose and agency, even as he faces the realities of his condition.

From Diagnosis to Purpose

Originally from Indiana, Klatch built a career as a management consultant in New Jersey before moving to Jerusalem, where he raised four children over three decades. Life felt "as normal as it gets these days," until a troubling incident surfaced. "I visited a park in Israel and loved it. I called my son to share, and he said, 'Dad, we were there together two weeks ago,'" Klatch recalls. This memory lapse led to a doctor's visit and a diagnosis of early-stage dementia.

The news hit hard. "It was a shock," Klatch admits, distinguishing it from age-related forgetfulness. Yet, he embraced acceptance swiftly. "I felt the blackness of memory loss already, so I said, 'This is where I am. Let's move forward.'" After relocating to Colorado to support his son, further diagnoses of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's followed. Klatch notes the imprecision of these labels: "It's not an exact science. Diagnoses can be fluid."

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Dementia

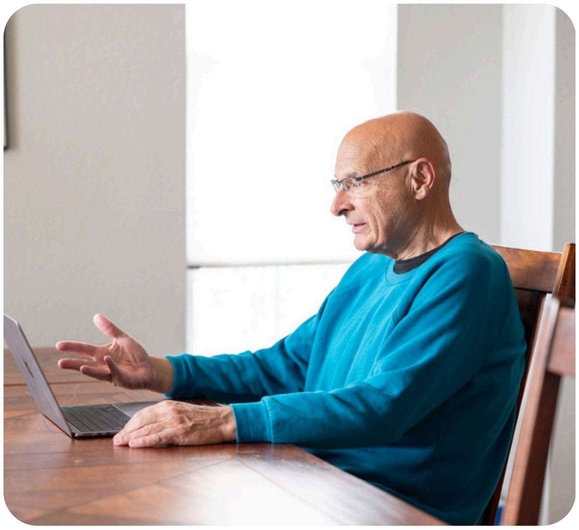
Having navigated dementia in Israel and the US, Klatch observes differences in support systems. In both places, opening up about his diagnosis invited connection. "I needed to talk about it," he says, leading to media appearances and speaking engagements. "People are eager to discuss this hidden topic, including how I plan my end-of-life choices." Support groups have been a lifeline, offering solidarity with others at similar stages. "Being with people in the same place is powerful and supportive," he shares, though he acknowledges stigma prevents some from speaking out.

Planning the End with Intention

Klatch is a member of Final Exit Network, an organization dedicated to educating and supporting those seeking choice in dying. He has turned to resources like (Derek Humphry's book) *Final Exit* and *The Peaceful Pill Handbook* to explore practical methods for hastening his death if his condition becomes unbearable. "Dementia destroys," he states plainly. "I'm less afraid of dying than of losing myself to dementia." His planning is meticulous, involving research into methods and suppliers, though he hasn't yet made purchases. "As my condition worsens, I take the next step," he explains.

Discussing his plans with his family was daunting. In one gathering, he shared both his diagnosis and intentions. "It was tough for me to hear their reactions," he reflects, but he promised to inform them before acting, easing their concerns. Recently, Klatch consulted a grief counselor to lessen the emotional impact on his loved ones, aiming to support their grieving process.

Options like medical aid in dying (MAID) are often inaccessible for dementia patients due to strict eligibility criteria, such as a six-month prognosis. Alternatives like voluntarily stopping eating and drinking (VSED) or traveling to Switzerland for assisted dying present their own challenges. Klatch knows a couple planning the latter, intending to go "hand in hand."



Growth Amid Challenges

Despite the diagnosis, Klatch has experienced profound personal growth. Once a pragmatic management consultant, he now embraces emotions more deeply. "My brain falters, but my feelings flourish. I'm experiencing the world in a new, balanced way," he says. He feels "complete" with his life and plans, waking on good days with peace. This journey has sparked philosophical reflections: "I'm dying, and it's a process of release. Living and dying dance a duet—how will you join the dance?"

Klatch advocates for open discussions about death, believing they enrich life. "We'd all benefit from talking openly about dying, healthy or not," he says.

Empowerment Through Self-Reliance

Klatch emphasizes personal agency in managing his condition. He monitors symptoms like hand tremors independently, complementing medical care. To share his journey, he created (the website) thealzheimersconversation.com, a free resource with journals, videos, and articles documenting his experiences.

Reflecting, Klatch credits platforms like Positive Aging Community for amplifying his voice: "My story needs outlets like this to reach others." His message is clear: Dementia may change life, but it doesn't erase purpose. By sharing openly, Klatch invites others to face uncertainty, live intentionally, and plan thoughtfully—transforming a diagnosis into a catalyst for meaningful living.

###

Guest essayist Steve Gurney is a nationally recognized leader and innovator in the field of aging and longevity, with over thirty-five years dedicated to empowering individuals and organizations to make informed decisions about senior living. As founder of Positive Aging Community and Positive Aging SourceBook, he fosters connection, education, and collaboration among professionals and families navigating the aging journey. A passionate advocate for intergenerational engagement and creative aging solutions, Steve combines professional expertise with hands-on experience as an educator, endurance athlete, and lifelong learner.

Death and Dying in the Media

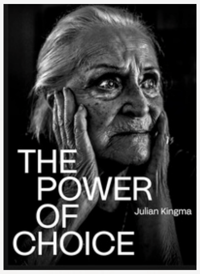
BY JIM VAN BUSKIRK, VOLUNTEER

In recent years, the death with dignity movement has steadily shifted from the margins of quiet conversations into the heart of mainstream media. Books, films, and documentaries are exploring end-of-life issues with new depth, honesty, and compassion, challenging cultural taboos and inviting open dialogue about autonomy, dignity, and the meaning of a "good death." Through storytelling, these works are helping to humanize the choices and challenges faced at life's end, and to broaden public understanding of what it means to die on one's own terms. This section highlights some of the most thought-provoking and powerful recent contributions to that growing conversation.

-Julian Kingma with Steve Offner-

The Power of Choice

(New South Books, 2025)



This catalogue of a pioneering photography exhibition at SOL Gallery, in Melbourne, Australia in spring of 2025, *The Power of Choice* stands firmly on its own merits. Award-winning Australian photojournalist Julian Kingma focuses his lens on the lives of terminally ill people who have chosen voluntary assisted dying (VAD)*, thus inviting public conversation on the still controversial and contentious topic throughout the world.

Kingma emphasizes, "This is not an exhibition about death—it's about dignity, autonomy, and love. These are stories of courage, acceptance, and clarity. The individuals and families I photographed weren't asking us to feel sorry for them—they were asking to be seen." Kingma's impactful images of more than than two dozen patients, families, and their caregivers are supplemented by sensitive essays describing their situations and honoring their humanity.

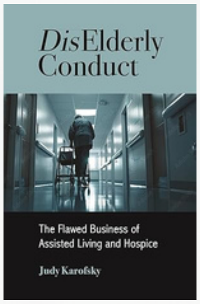
"To Life," a persuasive essay by Andrew Denton, further contextualizes the poignant black-and-white images, which "capture the humanity at what is, ultimately, an act of medical compassion. Their intimate nature offers insight, more powerful than words, into why some dying people choose this difficult path, and why those health professionals who help them feel privileged to do so. And they invite us to think about our own farewell, and what will be acceptable and meaningful to us as we die." Richard Flanagan in his essay, "Where is the Song?" emphasizes, "The process is deliberately difficult and trying. It requires great courage and commitment on the part of those who chose VAD and those around them—loved ones, carers, doctors."

This compelling volume, produced by Go Gentle Australia, a charity working to promote choice at the end of life, also includes important information on the VAD process, a timeline of VAD laws internationally, how the Australian laws work, a glossary of terms, and Australian organizations to contact. It is a very welcome addition to the ongoing international efforts to make VAD/MAID available to those who desire it.

**Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) is the terminology used in Australia and Switzerland, while Canada and the United States use the term medical aid in dying (MAID).*

-Judy Karofsky-

DisElderly Conduct: The Flawed Business of Assisted Living and Hospice
(New Village Press, 2025)



As regional coordinators, my FEN colleagues and I often hear potential clients voice their deeply held desire to avoid at all costs being placed in an assisted living facility. In exacting detail, Judy Karofsky chronicles the experiences of her active, nonagenarian mother, Lillian Deutsch, in six such facilities over the final years of her life. Her cautionary tale provides a window into the workings of such establishments, frequently understaffed, unregulated, and fraught with malfeasance.

By turns horrific, heartbreaking, or blackly humorous, the end of Lillian's life is not what she, or likely anyone, envisioned or would want. Karofsky, an expert in real estate and personal and corporate finance, assiduously explores the changing economic, medical, and social/emotional dynamics behind this growing industry to conclude, "The farther the corporate decision makers are from our seniors' housing communities and their inhabitants, the more unlikely we will be to achieve a consistent assisted living mission of compassionate care for the elderly. Our parents and grandparents are not mere digits. Consumers (aging residents and their families) have complex problems and interconnected lives that are messy and might not be easily programmed. Our obligation is to work together to create and advance a care plan that will honor the defenseless and protect our most vulnerable."

From an intensely personal perspective, this passionate cri de cœur comprehensively documents and articulates the need for social change. While there is no mention of exploring a hastened death, this title emphasizes the need for careful end-of-life options planning.

-Film directed by Sandra Luckow-

Vanishing: A Love Story (2025)

"This is not going to be a grim film. I promise." This announcement at the outset of this powerful, poignant, and important documentary sets the tone for what follows. The colorful animated graphics morphing the film's subtitle from "ALS" to "A Love Story" also convey the wit and playfulness of the protagonists.

After a brief scene with Paul Calandrino, Cai Emmons's devoted husband, we are immediately in Cai's bedroom, where—surrounded by friends and family—she self-administers medical aid in dying medication and dies. This extraordinary intimacy informs the remainder of the film as it rewinds six months to show Cai's trajectory from vibrant award-winning author and activist to becoming increasingly debilitated with what is eventually diagnosed as Bulbar-onset ALS. (This form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, is more aggressive than limb-onset ALS, with a less-than-two-years prognosis, and deprives its victims of physical speech capabilities). Using a text-to-voice device (the simulated voice technology used by Stephen Hawking) as well as her expressive face and hand gestures, she is nevertheless frustrated by her increasing physical limitations. Along the journey we meet Cai's family, friends, and physicians as they support her wishes, including a big party to celebrate the publication of two of her novels on the same day. The film is a remarkable collaboration between filmmaker Sandra Luckow and its vivacious and passionate subject. Both are committed to normalizing the subject of death, the film becoming a testament to Cai's life as an activist and writer. Using Cai's own writing combined with AI technology, the film allows Cai the last word on her own inner life.

-Benoit Cohen-

Wonderful
(Pointed Leaf Press, 2025)

When Benoit Cohen's father died in September 2010, under circumstances that might put the French producer, filmmaker, and screenwriter in legal jeopardy, he was unable to recount the story. Now, after the statute of limitations has lifted, he has set down in novelistic form the details of the event. Cohen vividly describes the decline and death of his father against a quotidian background of medical interventions, family dynamics, grief, and love. What makes this small, beautiful book unique is his creative presentation of two alternative scenarios: a difficult, isolated death and a more peaceful, dignified one.

This literary device powerfully highlights the limits of evolving legal and ethical considerations versus the agency of a personal choice.

-Film by Russ Kirkpatrick-
Susan (2025)

Susan Suchan's increasingly erratic behavior, both physical and mental, was initially misdiagnosed as early onset Alzheimer's, later determined to be frontotemporal dementia (FTD) with a primary progressive aphasia (PPA) disorder. The film unflinchingly follows Susan and her extended family as they accommodate the changes in Susan's personality, behavior, and language abilities. In the process, many fascinating reveals permeate the complicated family dynamics.

We witness Susan through many modes: stubborn, playful, sweet, smoking, swearing, laughing, crying. Nothing, however, diminishes her determination to put a face and a voice to her condition: She tirelessly advocates for people with FTD, at one point arduously dragging herself from her home in Tulsa, OK, to a conference of the Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration in New York City.

Throughout, she wrestles with the option of "self-exiting," declaring: "The word 'suicide' is like somebody just whipped out a gun. I mean it's just like, 'ohh, don't say the word!' Amongst my closest peers, we do have those discussions. If you are going to be there for a person that is newly diagnosed and their loved one's offering support, if we know that this is a terminal disease, why is that not part of the discussion? And this is a slow down so it's not like you're going just keel over one day, you're going to watch the process of death. So shouldn't we talk about that openly so that everyone feels well taken care of and you, on the other side, feel as though you met the needs of your loved ones?"

Two stark final statements emphasize the film's important message: "At this time no dementia advocacy organization endorses self-exiting as an option for those with a dementia diagnosis," and "There are only a small number of assisted suicide organizations who do endorse self-exiting for those with dementia." While one could challenge the specific terminology (Final Exit Network prefers "self-deliverance") the point is well-taken. In select theatres and streaming, this entertaining and educational 90-minute film by director/producer Russ Kirkpatrick is filled with humor, heartbreak, and humanity.

-Paul Rudnick-
What Is Wrong With You?
(Atria Books, 2025)

A friend alerted me to a minor subplot in Paul Rudnick's latest novel, *What Is Wrong With You?* It is difficult to tell when this event is supposed to have taken place, but assuming it's fairly contemporary, many of the details are factually incorrect. Those are corrected in [brackets] below.

"So as Jake got worse (with ALS) we did more research, because New York doesn't allow assisted suicide [chosen death], almost no states do, except Oregon [11 states support Medical Aid in Dying, which does not support neurodegenerative diseases such as ALS], and we'd have had to move there and establish residency for at least six months, and it was already too late for that. And we could've flown to Sweden [Switzerland], but even there we'd have to consult with two separate doctors and apply for permission, and Jake didn't want to spend his last days in a foreign country with, as he put it, 'too much blonde furniture that belonged in a Montessori school.' And so we went to the Hemlock Society website to get information about the drug cocktail, which has prescription elements, and there's the version where the person puts a plastic bag over their head but, Jake said, 'I'm not going to be dry cleaned to death.'" [Hemlock Society disbanded in 2003, and the website never included specific instructions.]

[...] "Then he blinked, and I knew it was time. First I gave him this liquid sedative, through a straw, which made him woozy, but not so out of it that he couldn't swallow. And I mashed up the pills in orange juice and I could see on his face what he wanted me to do, so I used the straw, and he could only take these tiny sips but he finally got it all down. And Paulo had said that I needed to watch Jake, to make sure he didn't barf the pills back up and choke on his own vomit, which can happen. [...] I had the feeling that everyone [EMTs] knew what was going on but understood and they weren't about to call in the police or a medical examiner. [...] I'd killed Jake. And I didn't question any of it, I knew it was what Jake wanted, what he'd demanded, and I'd ended his suffering."

While Rudnick is to be commended for normalizing, in a comic novel, the option of choosing the time of one's death, I wish he had done a bit more research to make his poignant descriptions more accurate.

Author's Note: While bringing choice in dying into mainstream media is encouraging, artistic license often distorts reality and can mislead those seeking accurate information. In a recent episode of The Morning Show, *for example, a character dies peacefully after taking a single fictional "illegal" pill—an unrealistic portrayal echoed in Pedro Almodóvar's* The Room Next Door *and even misunderstood from* The Peaceful Pill Handbook. *Such depictions can create false expectations. FEN's educational resources can help address these misconceptions.*

Deepening Our Impact...Together

> **“The opportunity that FEN provided my family gave me a new understanding of how temporary all of this really is—and [reminded me] to not take one moment for granted.”**
>
> *~ Client’s Family Member*

> *For me, the Exit Guide Program has been the biggest gift. There are no words I can find to express my thanks for this level of support. For the wisdom it took to create this program and the dedicated volunteer(s)...that carry out the mission, I will forever be beholden.*
>
> *~JR, FEN Client*

> *Different endings are right for different people, and I am certain that this is the right one for me. ...*
>
> *Thanks for helping me to know that I was not alone, and that what I was doing made sense.*
>
> *~IC, FEN Client*

The world has changed, but our purpose has not. For more than 20 years, Final Exit Network has stood for choice, dignity, and education at life’s end. Today, under new Executive Director Michelle Witte, we’re expanding our reach and supporting more people through compassionate guidance and education that helps destigmatize conversations about death and dying. **Your gift helps build a future where everyone can make informed, autonomous decisions about their dying process.**

Please give generously so that people have the freedom and support they need at the end of their life. Thank you.

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To educate and support those who want choice in dying.

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That any competent person unbearably suffering an intractable medical condition has the option to die legally and peacefully.