

# HOSPICE CARE DELIVERS HEMLOCK NIGHTCAP

By Debi Vinnedge



**A**fter piecing together the players involved in Terri Schiavo's death, it's crystal clear that she was merely a pawn in a much larger agenda, one intently focused on the legalization of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia in America. The plan was simple: sell the idea that no one should have to live with disabilities; sugarcoat the organization's name and intent; secure funding; and last but not least, infiltrate the legislature, the healthcare network and even the Catholic Church to the point that Margaret Sanger would've been proud.

## A rose by any other name...

Beginning in the 1930s, a group intent on advancing legalized suicide founded the Euthanasia Society of America. To make their cause more socially palatable, they would eventually change their name in the mid-sixties to Choice in Dying and then infiltrate the hospice industry with the so-called right-to-die agenda. That goal would be realized decades later through their merger with Partnership for Caring and Last Acts, a coalition of hospices worldwide.

In 1980, euthanasia advocate Derek Humphry founded the Hemlock Society of America in Santa Monica, California. It grew to over 50,000 members with 90 U.S. chapters. Humphry's group provided substantial financing for physician-assisted suicide legislation, including the eventual enactment of Oregon's 1997 law. But to advance euthanasia nationwide, a more subtle approach would be needed.

In 2003, Hemlock chapters across the country renamed themselves Death with Dignity, Compassion and Choices, Caring Friends, Compassion in Dying and End of Life Choices. While their names changed, their motives most certainly did not. Consider Humphry's words from a 2004 speech: "For too long, the Judeo-Christian religions have dominated ethical thinking in the West... Unfortunately, Anglo-American law makes no distinction on these grounds: A person cannot ask to be killed. We must get this modified." Humphry's latest book, *Good Euthanasia Guide 2004*, godlessly attests: "Don't bother to acquire this book if you are a person who believes that a religious deity is in sole charge of your life and dying."

## Financial backing

Meanwhile, pro-death foundations invest unprecedented funding to rid the world of those deemed a burden to society. With the 1994 formation of Project Death in America, for example, multi-billionaire founder George Soros stoked \$15 million to promote euthanasia in healthcare facilities nationwide.

Soros' fixation on death is both intimate and appalling. In a January 1995 interview with *The New Yorker*, Soros spoke of his own father's struggle with cancer and his

apparent irritation that his father did not wish to die. "Unfortunately he wanted to live," Soros stated. "I was kind of disappointed in him... I wrote him off."

In 2002, the PDIA gave \$1.2 million to fund the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, whose position states: "Were euthanasia and PAS [physician assisted suicide] being practiced in a regulated fashion, the hospice and palliative care approach should be that of non-interference in the receipt of these services, and non-abandonment of the person seeking assistance in suicide."

Similarly, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has given the Hemlock/Partnership for Caring and Last Acts merger, now known as Last Acts Partnership, over \$1 million. According to the foundation, a longtime supporter of Planned Parenthood and euthanasia, Last Acts was the launching pad for an \$11.25 million grant to "elevate awareness" and "inspire improvements" on end of life health care. The Johnson Foundation stated, "The program works at a number of clinical sites to encourage doctors to introduce palliative care earlier in patients' diagnoses and to change the culture of medical institutions, which often focus exclusively on cure." In other words, promote euthanasia, but do it deceptively.

## The connection

The stage was set; the money was in. The pro-euthanasia groups had new names. Many board members of Last Acts Partnership also served on the National Hospice and Palliative Care's (NHAPC) board, which proclaims itself "the largest nonprofit membership organization representing hospice and palliative care programs and professionals in the United States." Enter Mary Labyak, CEO of the Hospice of the Florida Suncoast, who also was on the boards of Partnership for Caring, Last Acts and the NHAPC. While there are over 100 Hospice corporations in Florida, the Suncoast Hospice directly operates Woodside Hospice, where Terri Schiavo spent the last five years of her life. If you don't smell a rat yet, keep reading.

The cast of characters in Terri Schiavo's case who had direct ties to Hospice is both astonishing and frightening. Remember, Terri never should have been in hospice at all, since it is a federally funded program for dying patients. But the court decided she was PVS and, therefore, terminally ill. Now if a condition misdiagnosed as much as 43 percent can be considered "terminal," patients can be brought to hospice for feeding

tube removal while the government pays the tab. How very convenient.

And when Terri was placed there in April 2000, Michael Schiavo's attorney George Felos was an active Suncoast Hospice board member and former chairman. No conflict there, right?

Now enter Everett Rice, Pinellas County Sheriff from 1988 through 2004, who was charged with investigating Terri's 1990 collapse, but neglected to turn the case over to the homicide division. Rice, a close friend and campaign backer of Judge George Greer, was also a Florida Hospice board member.

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Was it mere coincidence that John Lenderman, brother to Woodside board member Martha Lenderman and fellow judge of George Greer in the Sixth Judicial Circuit Court, also served on the advisory board for Suncoast Hospice in 2000—the same year Terri was admitted? He was a key member of the Pinellas County Domestic Violence investigation committee, but surely he would not have hindered an investigation into complaints against Michael Schiavo, or would he?

Perhaps we should question Martha Lenderman herself, who served on the Suncoast Hospice board with Felos in 2000 and later became chairman in 2002-03, during Michael's second attempt to starve Terri. Ms. Lenderman was a consultant with the Florida Department of Children and Families, putting her in a position to influence the DCF investigation on Terri's abuse and neglect.

And what about the glaring collusion between intertwined Hospice affiliations and prominent Florida lawmakers?

Not only do both state Rep. "Gus" Michael Bilirakis (R) and Senator Jim King (R) tout themselves as former board members of Florida Hospice, but they both lobbied for the fateful 1999 legislation that ruled feeding tubes were artificial life support. During pro-life pressure over Terri's case in the 2004-2005 legislative sessions, Florida lawmakers scrambled to amend that, but Senate president King quashed the motion. "As soon as you put something

on the floor, as well-intended as it may be, anybody can amend it,” King stated. “Then all of a sudden I’m sitting there facing a bill or bills that can dismantle what I consider to be my legacy.”

That “legacy” began in 1998 with King’s creation of the Florida Panel on End of Life Care for the purpose of amending Florida statutes on end-of-life issues. Among the notables on that panel was Suncoast Hospice’s CEO, Mary Labyak.

## Project disGrace

In the background another quietly sinister group became formal advisors to the End of Life Panel. Known as Project Grace, their board members include none other than Mary Labyak, Schiavo attorney George Felos and one more link in the Florida corruption: Sister Pat Shirley, O.S.F., officially representing the St. Petersburg diocese.

Project Grace’s motive was to use religion and the clergy to convince the patient or family that withdrawal of medical care, including food and water, was morally acceptable, even in non-terminal patients. Indeed, Sr. Pat began promoting the Project Grace advance directives agenda at Catholic parishes around the diocese. When staunchly pro-life R.N. Jana Carpenter, a known activist, discovered a scheduled seminar at her own parish, she confronted her pastor, arguing that Project Grace did not conform to Catholic teaching. Despite assurance that the project had Bishop Robert Lynch’s approval, Carpenter persuaded him to postpone the workshop.

In a subsequent meeting where Ms. Carpenter pointed out the deep flaws of Project Grace, Sr. Pat smugly responded that Fr. Kevin O’Rourke, bioethicist at Loyola University in Chicago, enthusiastically supported their philosophy. Fr. O’Rourke is the same priest who later called the March 2004 Vatican statement requiring artificial hydration and nutrition “irresponsible.” According to O’Rourke, “If a person does not have the potential for cognitive-affective function it means that the person cannot pursue the friendship of God, the purpose of life, through his or her free actions. Therefore, the moral imperative to help the person toward health and existence is no longer present.”

O’Rourke was outwardly hostile toward pro-lifers in the Terri Schiavo case, calling their attempts for interceding “despicable.” “The government of Florida is a laughingstock for the rest of the country,” O’Rourke said in a November 2003 statement to the *Miami Herald*. “Anyone who knows the law knows

this is an abuse of personal rights.”

Using such statements from “Catholic” ethicists, Project Grace member and euthanasia author Lofty Basta, M.D., who openly campaigned for Terri Schiavo’s death, described how they convinced the End of Life Panel to include PVS in legislative amendments. More disturbing, Project Grace held that advanced directives requesting medical treatment should not oblige the physician to provide it—a statement right out of O’Rourke’s own writings.

With a program so blatantly in opposition to Catholic tenets, both the Catholic Medical Association and the National Catholic Bioethics Center quickly denounced it. But that did not stop the Diocese of St. Petersburg from continuing to promote the program to its parishes and Catholic healthcare facilities.

Former St. Petersburg Diocesan Respect Life director Sharon Iler was obviously mesmerized by the Project Grace philosophy. In October 2003 the *St. Petersburg Times* quoted her saying: “Christians partner with God in the sense that [H]e grants free will and autonomy over their bodies... Family members may decide to stop efforts that prolong a loved one’s life. That’s all right with God.”

Was it this O’Rourke/Project Grace mentality that caused Bishop Lynch to ignore the Schindlers’ pleas to save their daughter? Or perhaps the persuasion of another nun, Sr. Karen Burns, O.S.F., another former board member of Suncoast Hospice on staff at St. Anthony’s Hospital, where Project Grace was implemented?

Should we not question why, despite pro-life pleas, the diocese refused to encourage Catholics to “get out and vote” in the 2004 Greer reelection, especially when his opponent openly supported the Vatican position? Instead, sadly enough, the diocesan attorney firm, Devito and Higham, shelled out maximum financial contributions to Judge Greer’s reelection campaign.

Whatever conclusion is drawn, it is certain that Terri’s fate was sealed as the deposits hit the bank and the co-conspirators basked in their success. Meanwhile, a chilling pattern has descended on America. From *Griswold* to *Roe* to *Browning* to *Schiavo*, the legal precedent for “privacy” has swelled into an ugly demonic entity that will launch the right to die movement into full-blown euthanasia in this country within the next decade. It happened with abortion in less than eight years and it will happen again. The question remains: Will we be able to stop it?

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