

## LAST ACTS NEWS

# Writers Project Brings End-of-Life to TV



Since 2000, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation named PFC the National Program Office for Last Acts, the nation's largest campaign to improve care and caring near the end of life. In this column we will periodically spotlight some of its innovative projects.

Have you noticed that stories on television are beginning to portray death and dying with more accuracy and sensitivity? In no small measure, this is due to the work of the Last Acts Writers Project, which tries to interact with writers and producers of films and television to raise awareness of end-of-life issues, offer expert assistance in writing scripts, and provide story ideas about life's end.

Why is this project so significant? A recent study reported in the journal, *Health Affairs*, indicates about half the regular viewers of the NBC series, *ER*, feel that in addition to being entertained, they learned important health facts from the show. A third also said they received information from the program that assisted them in making healthcare decisions. Talk about impact: *ER* has 22 to 28 million viewers each week!

## Education and Entertainment

It's still a challenge to reach those viewers. "Television shows are entertainment, not primarily public education vehicles," says Bill Duke, a Last Acts' consultant who directs the Writers Project. Duke develops contacts and personal relationships with the entertainment industry and serves as a broker between script writers and Last Acts' experts. "I have to convince the writers and producers that they can entertain and educate. I also have to provide expert information and guidance without preaching," he says. In addition, many shows have paid medical advisors who are wary of the Writers Project experts encroaching on their territory with free advice.

Despite the difficulties, the project has met with a number of successes, demonstrating that death and dying can produce

good drama. Story lines on *ER*, *NYPD Blue*, *Gideon's Crossing* and *City of Angels*, can be attributed to the Writers Project. For example, Last Acts' experts consulted on the two-part *ER* story featuring the death of Dr. Green's father. Among its many poignant moments, the *ER* episode confronts the common issue of caregiver denial in the face of death. When Dr. Green tries to dissuade his dying father from drinking alcohol, the father asks, "Do you think it's going to kill me?"

The Writers Project also can claim an important role in HBO's production of *Wit*. Last Acts' consultant, Linda Schickedanz (a clinical nurse specializing in advanced oncology and pain management), was on the set in England for three months. "It was very important to us to really get it right ... down to the smallest gesture or piece of equipment," says *Wit* producer Cary Brokaw.

Another benefit for industry producers — and the public — is the promotional efforts by Last Acts Partners and Partnership for Caring. Last year, for example, 73 stories on 29 ABC affiliated stations accompanied a *Gideon's Crossing* episode that portrayed decision-making disagreements that often surface among family members of a dying person.

There are also failures. "We have had difficulty getting through to writers with the popular courtroom and cop shows," says Duke. Many of the writers have law degrees and feel they don't need advice on end-of-life legal issues. "We hope to make inroads through a joint initiative with the American Bar Association and the Beverly Hills Bar Association," he adds.

## A Ripple Effect

In the end, it's important to look at the bigger picture. A few years ago the term

'palliative care' was never heard on entertainment television. Now it is. The information used on one show gets picked up by another and then another, even without the direct aid of expert consultation.

And, the Writers Project keeps adding programs to its list. This season watch for its imprint on new episodes of *Touched by an Angel*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *CSI*. For more information, visit the Writers Project on the Last Acts web site, [www.lastacts.org](http://www.lastacts.org).

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assume all members of the team know the full picture. Ask the primary care physician to take charge.

### Call in the "cavalry" when necessary.

If you are unable to get the results you want on your own, seek professional assistance.

- ✓ Most healthcare facilities have social workers, patient advocates, chaplains and nurses who will work with you and help address your concerns.
- ✓ If you are dealing with an eldercare situation, consider hiring a geriatric care manager.
- ✓ If you are battling the "system," enlist the help of your state ombudsman for managed or long-term care.
- ✓ Call the Partnership for Caring hotline 1-800-989-9455 (option 1) for advice.

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