

I'm here to speak with you today about the life and death of a dear friend, Annette Vachon. She was the first person in the state of Vermont to utilize the Act 39 prescription and I'd like to take this time to impart, on her behalf, the gratitude she felt for the availability of this prescription and the relief it provided her her last few days.

Annette spent her childhood in rural Massachusetts, her adult life as the owner of a successful court reporting agency in the heart of downtown Boston and retired at the age of fifty to her home in Johnson, Vermont. Prior to her diagnosis, she spent her fourteen years of retirement traveling the world; China, Egypt, Central and South America, all parts of Europe. She crafted beautiful works of art, nurtured a household of cats, became auntie to many of the neighborhood children, and developed strong and rich friendships with those in her life.

Annette and I had been close friends for twelve years before her diagnosis. She was twenty four years my senior; strong and vital and full of life. Our friendship was rich with conversation and even before her illness, we talked extensively about the culture surrounding death. She lived her life purposefully and specifically and had the same intention and approach regarding her end of life care.

It was a gift to be Annette's primary care provider throughout her illness. While I took on the management of her appointments and her day to day care, I also watched her navigate this illness with grace and maintain a clear vision of what lay ahead.

On May 1st of 2014, Annette was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer, which had metastasized into the bone of her right arm. Her initial care took place in Boston at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute and it was when we transferred to UVM in June that she made her initial inquiry for the right to die prescription. Twenty five years prior to her own diagnosis, Annette sat with her mother as she died a slow and painful death from respiratory failure due to the same kind of lung cancer. Annette was very clear that she did not want to suffer the same kind of death. She had made absolute peace with her fate, had lived a full and exciting life and did not feel cheated. She was so glad to have found herself in a state that allowed her the right to die with a sense of dignity and control.

In August, when the cancer was clearly laying claim to her quality of life, she inquired again with her oncologist about the acquisition of the prescription. By mid September a written request was submitted and two witnesses had signed that she was of sound mind and pursuing this of her own accord. The longest part of the process was acquiring a second signature. While both her radiation oncologist and pulmonary specialist agreed that she was an ideal candidate for this prescription it was clear that new conversations were happening among the medical community, an entirely new dialogue regarding end of life patient care and that every angle was being considered. Even though the law had been in place since May of 2013, it wouldn't be until October of 2014 that Annette would become the first person in the state to acquire this prescription and it was clear that Annette, her prescribing physician, the second signature and the pharmacist were all glad for the safeguards in place to assist them through this new process. As her caregiver, I also found these checks and balances comforting.

Annette had been sick now nearly six months but it was the day the second physician agreed to sign that Annette cried her first tears. She knew now that she had a safety net; a safeguard against a painful death. I picked up the prescription on October 23rd. By October 27th, riddled with chronic systemic pain twenty four hours a day and having to rely on constant oxygen support, she knew her time had come and that she was ready to go.

We all surrounded her that Monday afternoon, her community of friends and caregivers, all of us expressing our love and gratitude for years of friendship and she, in turn, expressed her gratitude for our love and support. Following the procedure advised by her oncologist and pharmacist, she bravely took the prescription, laid down and closed her eyes. Within sixteen minutes, she passed. Peacefully and without pain or struggle. It was just the death she'd hoped for.

On this day, exactly one year ago, at the same hour that I stand here sharing this story, she and I were sitting at her first appointment reading the results of that initial cat scan, having no idea how her story would unfold over the next several months. It's amazing how much can change in the course of one year.

those of us who knew and loved Annette found it so appropriate that she chose to die in the same way she chose to live. Blazing new trails & with amazing grace. It was a privilege to share her story w/ you today.