

A Personal Tribute to Jack Kevorkian

by Faye Girsh, President
Hemlock Society of San Diego

Love him or hate him, Jack Kevorkian was the face of the right-to-die movement for almost a decade. As he forced people to confront the struggle of suffering people seeking a peaceful death, he brought the issue to breakfast tables for discussion all over the world. Thanks to him, support for aid in dying rose to 75% in this country in 1998 at the time of his trial; it has fallen to 43% according to the latest Gallup poll without his strident voice.

He was criticized within our movement for helping Tom Youk, using the same method that has been legal in the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium for several years and, thus, providing this man with ALS the ability to live longer and die peacefully before he choked to death. And critics felt he should not have shown that death to 60 million people on TV. That bold move, supported by Mike Wallace, forced the world to come out of their denial and see what voluntary euthanasia looks like. Maybe we should see more actual deaths -- in hospice, in the ICU, and in hospital -- so we could choose which method of dying is more humane and civilized.

From June 1990 when the world heard that he helped Alzheimer's sufferer Janet Adkins stumblingly request his help and die in the back of his VW van to 1998 when millions saw Tom Youk emphatically requesting a lethal injection to end his battle with ALS, Jack Kevorkian challenged us to understand that to end intolerable suffering many seek help from a compassionate doctor who can provide a dignified and peaceful ending. And he convinced most people -- and three juries -- that he was right.

Though he was not everyone's idea of the friendly family doctor he will be missed by many people, such as:

- those whose loved ones were able to have a peaceful death;
- those who hoped that he would be there for them;
- those who support the idea of being able to choose a humane death;
- those who applaud the guts it took to openly and continually defy unjust laws.

We don't get to pick our visionaries. The award-winning film, "You Don't Know Jack," has given the public the chance to understand the principles for which he lost his freedom as well as his quirks and idiosyncrasies. We would have liked him to support our efforts to change the law and our incremental steps to improve dying but Jack Kevorkian had little time for the right-to-die movement. He felt our attempts were too timid. And, reciprocally, movement leaders made an effort to distance themselves from his "antics." But the rank and file in our movement loved Jack Kevorkian. If there were to be other doctors who would go public, take the same risks he did for a sustained time, and make people aware that suffering people sometimes seek a peaceful death as the solution then criticism of Jack Kevorkian might be warranted. But nobody, ever, on this planet took the risks he did to challenge the public and the authorities to do what he knew was right. In 1998 politically ambitious Judge Jessica Cooper silenced his voice for 8 years, now death -- Kevorkian's close friend -- has done it permanently. He will not soon be forgotten -- or replaced.