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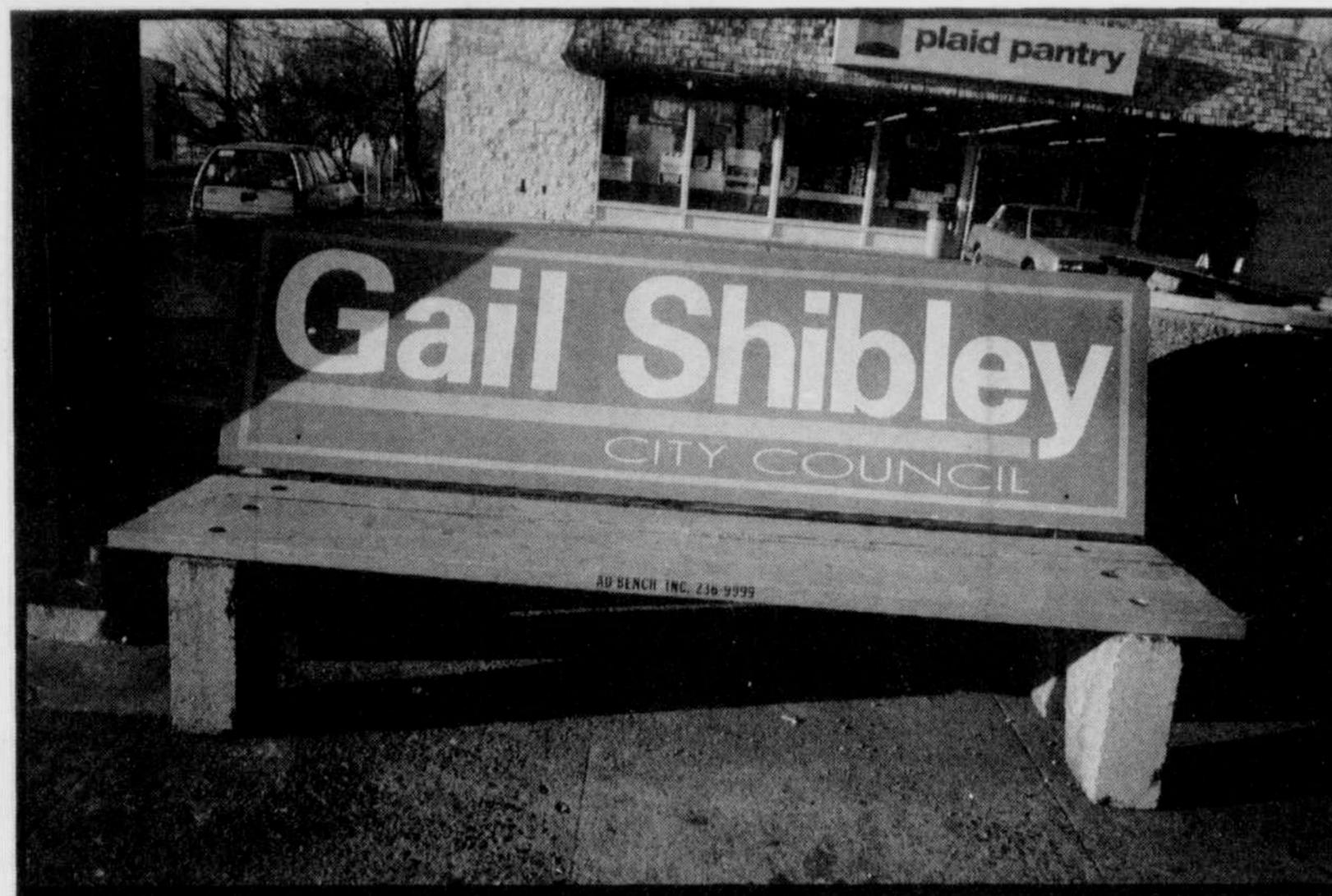
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steppin' out



editorial

Letting go of life

Hastening one's death when faced with terminal illness should be a matter of choice

by Renée LaChance

In this issue you'll find the story of a family who attended the real-life party for Los Angeles designer Harry Stein that is the basis for the movie *It's My Party*. The movie gives a fictionalized account of the two-day party Stein held for his family and friends prior to his committing doctor-assisted suicide to escape the debilitation of PML, a complication of AIDS. The couple interviewed relays their experiences and share photographs from the party.

The issue of assisted dying is disturbing to some, yet it reflects the experience of many terminally ill people. *It's My Party* subtly brings to light the debate over the right to choose the time and place of one's own death, and the role that family and friends play in that decision. In addition to this movie and several books, the right to die is being explored in the federal courts.

Two recently published books on the subject include *Final Acts of Love* by Stephen Jamison, Ph.D., and *Why Suicide?* by Eric Marcus. Jamison's book explores the philosophical aspects of assisting someone to die, while Marcus' book literally answers 200 of the most frequently asked questions about suicide, including assisted suicide. Both books illustrate scenarios that one should consider before agreeing to help someone to die, or before choosing to hasten one's own death.

The judicial system is weighing the constitutionality of a person's right to die. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco overturned on March 6 a Washington state law that banned assisted suicide. The court found a constitutional right to die for adult patients who are terminally ill and mentally competent. Washington's attorney general immediately announced that she will ask the U.S. Supreme Court to consider the issue. The Supreme Court has until June 30, the end of its current term, to agree or decline to hear the case. If it declines, the ruling of the circuit court will be the definitive law allowing the right to die.

This would not clear the way for Oregon's Measure 16, however, which passed with 51 percent of the vote in 1994. That measure would allow physicians to prescribe lethal doses of drugs at the request of a patient who is terminally ill and diagnosed with six months to live. An injunction prevented the law from going into effect, and now the state is asking U.S. District Court Judge Michael Hogan to remove the injunction and allow the law to stand. The court's next hearing on Measure 16 will be on April 23 in Eugene.

The results of a survey of Washington state physicians was recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The survey questioned 828 physicians on how often and the reasons why patients asked for help in dying. The survey found that 26 percent of the doctors had been asked to help end the life of a patient, and of those, 27 percent granted the request. The patients who requested help to hasten death were more worried about emotional pain than physical pain; they were concerned about becoming incapacitated, a "burden" to their families. The survey illustrates that many people facing death would like control over how and when it will happen. It also shows that some doctors already cooperate in hastening death.

The proliferation of AIDS and cancer has many of us witnessing the final days of people we love. Some choose to end their own lives with the help or support of family and friends, while others hang on to life with everything they've got until it eventually slips away. It is increasingly important for each of us to decide where we stand on the right-to-die issue, for ourselves and our loved ones.

The ruling of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court should stand, and the injunction against Measure 16 in Oregon should be lifted. The government needs to recognize the importance of assisted dying and one's right to choose it, so that legal and humane boundaries can be drawn.

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