

Barbara Roberts

The former governor reflects on 20 years defending death with dignity

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Barbara and Frank Roberts were Oregon's original power couple. By 1991, Barbara was culminating an already remarkable political career by becoming Oregon's first elected female governor. Her husband, Frank, was a senior member of the state Senate and the Democratic president pro tem.

He was also terminally ill with the cancer that would take his life in 1993, too soon to see the landmark Death with Dignity Act he championed become law. The law allows terminally-ill Oregonians to end their lives through the voluntary self-administration of lethal medications, prescribed by a physician for that purpose.

Three times Frank Roberts introduced a death with dignity bill into the State Legislature and each time it failed to clear committee. In the fall of 1993, a citizens' initiative had picked up the banner, endorsed by Roberts as a promise to her husband. By November 1994, Oregonians voted in the Death with Dignity Act, the first of its kind in the nation.

An injunction followed, but it was lifted in 1997. That year, a ballot measure seeking to overturn the act was defeated by more than 60 percent of voters. Oregon had spoken.

Challenges came and went, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but 20 years later, the law remains intact, serving as a model and inspiration for legislation across the country.

On Nov. 15, Washington, D.C.'s city council passed its own death with dignity act, joining five other jurisdictions to do so.

In October, Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law California's end-of-life bill, making it the



Former governor Barbara Roberts at her home in Southeast Portland.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Since 1997, 1,545 people have received prescriptions written under Oregon's Death with Dignity Act. Of those, 991 patients have died ingesting the medications. Of the 132 deaths under the Act in 2015, nearly all – just over 90 percent – died at home.

Source: Oregon Public Health Division, Feb. 4, 2016

fifth and largest state to pass similar legislation.

On Election Day, Colorado became the sixth, as voters there overwhelmingly approved Proposition 106 which legalized assisted death for terminally ill patients.

In 2017, approximately 20 similar bills are expected to go before state lawmakers and voters, which means Roberts has a busy year ahead. She has championed the cause whenever called upon, testifying before lawmakers about the need for end-of-life autonomy and drawing from her own experience with the death of her husband.

She has compelled the powers that be to catch up to the popular public opinion that supports death-with-dignity options.

In 2002, Roberts authored "Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology: A Guide for Facing Death and Loss." The book has become a frequent referral for hospice workers

Frank's life and death also inspired Barbara Coombs Lee, the executive director of Compassion and Choices Oregon. Compassion and Choices consults people on end-of-life care and advocates for more legal options nationwide. Lee co-authored the Oregon legislation, and her organization is the beneficiary of Robert's 80th birthday celebration dinner, Dec. 7, at Montgomery Park in Portland. Tickets are available online through Eventbrite.com

Together, Lee and Roberts spoke with Street Roots about the significance and lasting impact of Oregon's Death with Dignity Act.

Joanne Zuhl: You wrote in "Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology" that we are so afraid of death in this culture, so geared toward medical miracle, we seem to have lost all sense of perspective. I'd like you to expand on that and also on the perspective you've gained over time.

Barbara Roberts: My husband had died just a year and a half before I started writing the book. And I had found how much people don't want to talk about it. They want you to just get over it, get well, move on, get a life. They start saying it will be better. They really are uncomfortable with the whole subject matter. I was governor and he was a member of the state senate, and we were very open about the fact that he had a terminal diagnosis, and that he wasn't going to do any further treatment. And we did it because we thought people should be able

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