

# Colorado man with Parkinson's pushes for right-to-die law

His bill goes further than Oregon's law

By IVAN MORENO  
Associated Press

DENVER — Lance Wright is a meticulous planner: He has a line ready for when his hands shake during work presentations, and for his life's final days, an audacious plan to let people with incurable illnesses choose when they die.

The 63-year-old energy efficiency consultant and Parkinson's disease patient is trying to do what many better-funded and organized activists cannot: Get language on next year's Colorado ballot that would give him and others the right to seek assistance from doctors to die — and then convince voters to approve it as a constitutional amendment.

Wright has long supported the idea that people should have the right to end their own lives, closely following the 1994 Oregon debate that led to the nation's initial right-to-die law. But when the first symptoms of Parkinson's disease appeared 12 years ago, his interest became personal.

"A battleship off the coast will focus your attention," he said.

Wright's proposal goes further than what lawmakers and advocates of the "right-to-die" movement want because a patient doesn't have to be months away from dying, and patients don't have to administer life-ending drugs on their own. So there's already opposition to Wright's effort, and since he has no organization to help with the time and money needed for the expensive task of signature-gathering, he is taking a major political long shot. But he's used to long shots.

He unsuccessfully ran as a Democrat against former Republican U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo when that suburban Denver district was GOP country in 2002. Last year, he collected 22



David Zalubowski/AP Photo

**Lance Wright, who is suffering with Parkinson's disease, talks about a proposal that he is advancing to allow him and other terminally ill patients to have the right to seek assistance from a third party when they want to die in Colorado. Wright wants Colorado voters to decide next year whether terminally ill people should be allowed to end their own lives with medical help.**

votes as a write-in candidate for a Denver statehouse district.

Wright has more at stake in this campaign.

"I feel that it's a basic human right to be in charge of your own destiny, if you will. The situation now is that you and I are not in control of what happens at the end of our lives," said Wright, who served two terms in the Parker Town Council from 1996 to 2000.

At the moment, the disease is more of an inconvenience for Wright. During presentations, he quips that his shaking hands don't mean he's nervous, just that he has Parkinson's. In general, he's still healthy and able-bodied. He walks his wife home and carries her books from the University of Denver, where she's a law professor.

"I love life. I want to live every minute that I can," Wright said. But he knows the time may come when he will be unable to walk on his own or swallow food.

Wright is finalizing the language for his proposal to define what would qualify as having an incurable condition to get aid in dying from a doctor. He said it would not apply to people who are depressed or suicidal.

If a legal panel finds that it complies with standards for a ballot measure, he'll need to start collecting more than 98,000 signatures from registered voters by next summer.

He'll have to do that without the support of Compassion and Choices, a national group advocating for right-to-die laws. The group opposes

Wright's plan because doctors can inject patients with the fatal drugs.

"We just think that it's a little bit too dangerous, quite honestly," said Roland Halpern, a Denver-based spokesman for the group, which wants laws requiring patients to take the drugs on their own to ensure it is what they want.

State lawmakers pursuing the idea do not back Wright's plan, either, largely because the ballot language does not include the "terminally ill."

"I don't think (the proposal) uses the word 'euthanasia,' but it seems to provide for euthanasia, which we do not advocate," said Democratic Rep. Lois Court of Denver, who is sponsoring end-of-life legislation specifying that a patient be

certified as terminally ill, have formally requested life-ending drugs several times, and self-administer those drugs, among other conditions.

Wright argues some like him may not be able to take that medication on their own. And people in similar circumstance may not qualify for what lawmakers are proposing. An Alzheimer's patient may lose the ability to take care of himself but still not be considered terminal, for example.

Halpern's group has supported attempts to pass right-to-die bills in other states, including California, where Gov. Jerry Brown signed a measure into law in October. Other states where doctors can prescribe life-ending drugs for the terminally ill are Oregon,

Washington, Vermont and Montana.

If Wright succeeds in getting to the ballot, he'd face opposition from religious organizations and conservatives who view the laws in Oregon and other states as facilitating suicide. Some doctors have also expressed concern that making life-ending drugs available to patients takes away hope of recovery when a terminal diagnosis can turn out to be wrong.

Wright said he's optimistic his idea will draw support. He insists the issue is not just about what he's going through.

He said he's "determined to make sure that I've done everything that I can to provide the sort of framework for individual liberty that I can for folks here in Colorado."

## Foss: He has coached more than 60 different teams in Astoria, Vernonia

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"This is my 30th year of teaching industrial arts," he said. "Thirty years in the PERS system, and I could technically retire in the middle of next year, because PERS doesn't kick in until six months after you start."

But, "right now my heart is still here (at Astoria High School)," said Foss, who doesn't know when he will retire from teaching. "It depends on what my heart says. When it's time, it's time."

As for coaching athletics, "Twenty-seven years of coaching golf has been a great run," he said. "I came back after a couple years' break, but I figure right now is a good time. I don't see coming back and doing any coaching in the near future."

By his count, Foss has coached more than 60 different teams in his years at Vernonia and Astoria High Schools, and as a club volleyball coach.

"Twenty-seven years in golf (Vernonia and Astoria), 16 as a head volleyball coach (both schools); club volleyball for eight to 10 years; and I've coached boys' volleyball and girls soccer ... it's a lot of teams.

"I have a bunch of old three-ring binders in the basement to prove that," he laughed. "The file cabinets are full of old coaching playbooks, diagrams and plays."

So don't expect Dan Foss to just step away from sports. The competitive fire still burns for the guy who once got to carry the Olympic Torch, when it passed through Salem on its way to the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

"I'm competitive," said Foss, who admits, "I've slammed a few clipboards down on the bench a few times."

He added, "I love all sports. Volleyball is the most rewarding for the kids. When

they work so hard and accomplish what they do as a team. When they form on the court as a unit, it's awesome. I have great memories from both volleyball and golf."

Golf "is more mental, and it's more individual, with more preparation prior to the matches."

Serving as the public address announcer for sporting events, Foss says, keeps him close to sports, without the stress.

Chris Hunt and Lou Marconeri also share some of the announcing duties.

"I've enjoyed staying involved with the volleyball program through announcing," he said. "It's an honor to be asked. I enjoy it. With the atmosphere — and I tend

to amplify — it works out pretty good."

And Foss "amplifies" a lot of volleyball slang for the fans, who tend to enjoy the matches a little bit more. Such as "Black & Decker" for a kill off the block and "cross-court crunch," to name a couple.

"There's some fun ones in there," Foss said. "Those sayings I have to give credit to the USA Men's National team. I picked those up in 1988, from all the different slang terms they had. I just adopted some of those terms."

The Lady Fishermen also "have fun with the music," he said. "That's not my credit. The girls prepare the warm-up CD. They time it perfectly so

that when the general warm-ups are done, it kicks right over to the slow, subdued music (usually the theme from "Titanic") when the other team begins hitting drills.

"Then we pick up the pace," when Astoria starts hitting.

And then there's golf, which Foss hopes to play a little more of once retirement

officially begins.

"I hope to do more golf tours," he said. "With me not coaching this spring, I will be able to start my preparation a lot earlier than May. I look forward to cranking it up and hope for the best. I'm 52 now, but still hitting the ball just as far as I did in college, and a little farther."

— Gary Henley

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