



32 Broadway, Suite 1400 New York, NY 10004 TEL 212 989-8121 FAX 212 989-8230 [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov)  
AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY, INC./KCET/WGBH/WNET

Contact:

Cynthia López, 212-989-7425, [clopez@pov.org](mailto:clopez@pov.org), 646-729-4748 (cell)

Cathy Lehrfeld, 212-989-7425, [clehrfeld@pov.org](mailto:clehrfeld@pov.org)

On-Line Pressroom: [www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom](http://www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom)

## **P.O.V.'s "A FAMILY UNDERTAKING"**

By Elizabeth Westrate

### ***MEDIA ALERT – FACT SHEET***

National Air Date: Tuesday, August 3, 2004 at 10:00 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings)

Summary: Prior to the 20th century, most Americans prepared their dead for burial with the help of family and friends, but today most funerals are part of a multimillion-dollar industry run by professionals. This increased reliance on mortuaries has alienated Americans from life's only inevitability – death. **A Family Undertaking** explores the growing home-funeral movement by following several families in their most intimate moments as they reclaim the end of life, forgoing a typical mortuary funeral to care for their loved ones at home. *An Independent Television Service (ITVS) co-presentation.*

Filmmaker's  
Statement:

Elizabeth Westrate

"**A Family Undertaking** is a documentary about the home-funeral movement in America. This movement is similar to the home-birthing movement, in that families are reclaiming the end of life and taking care of all the funeral arrangements by themselves at home. They are taking back a ritual that until the 20th century was very common. This is legal in almost every state, but most people don't know that.

"The most obvious benefits of a home funeral are financial. It is a much less expensive option than going through a mortuary, where costs can easily sore beyond \$5,000. But many people who have been through this experience actually feel the emotional benefits are more much important. For some people, choosing home death care is empowering, and it helps them to accept the fact that a death has occurred. Many families who have gone through this say that the experience brought them closer together, and helped them start to move through the grieving process.

With this film, I would like people to know that they have choices about how they may care for their loved ones when they die. It becomes especially difficult to talk about funeral preparations when someone is ill, but as uncomfortable as it may be, I believe it's necessary to start a dialogue in our families about these issues. If this film can spark those conversations, then I will feel that I have been successful."

People featured  
In **A Family  
Undertaking**:

#### **The Carr Family**

A ranching family from Prairie City, South Dakota, the Carr Family prepared for the funeral of their ailing grandfather, Bernard, during the filming of **A Family Undertaking**. Previously, they buried Bernard's wife, Lola, on the



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family farm as well. Abiding by their elders' wishes, the Carr family feels that having a home funeral made closure to their loved ones' lives possible. Keith Carr reports that both Bernard and Lola got to spend their last night on the ranch they loved, where they raised their family, just as they wanted.

### **Beth Knox**

The president and co-founder of Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death, Ms. Knox lost her seven-year-old daughter in a tragic car accident in 1995. Since then, she has devoted her time to being a death midwife, helping families cope with the loss of a loved one by keeping the deceased close to the family instead of handing them off to strangers for burial. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

### **Anne Stuart and Dwight Caswell**

A native of northern California, Anne planned her home funeral after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Devoutly religious, she had hoped her participation in the film would be a testimony to her strong Christian faith, which Dwight, her husband, believes accounts for her fearlessness in the face of death. Anne died in October 2002 at the age of 56.

Filmmaker's  
Biography:

### **Elizabeth Westrate**

#### **Director / Producer**

Elizabeth Westrate is currently producing and directing a film for the humanitarian organization Heifer International. Previous producing credits include pieces for the Sundance Channel series **Aftereffect**, **24 Frame News** and **Right Now! At the Sundance Film Festival**. Westrate was the associate producer of the HBO production of Eve Ensler's **The Vagina Monologues**, which aired in 2002 in conjunction with V-Day, a global movement to end violence against girls and women. She was also the associate producer of **Our House: A Very Real Documentary About Kids of Gay and Lesbian Parents**, an ITVS production that was broadcast on public television in 2000.

Length: 56:46

### **Credits:**

Director/ Producer: Elizabeth Westrate  
Editor: Melissa Neidich  
Photography: Scott Sinker  
Additional Photography: Brett Wiley and Buddy Squires  
Sound: Brad Bergbom, Fiona McBain, Doug Dunderdale,  
Luanna Plunkett and Mike Dunn

### **Festivals:**

- Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (2004)
- Key West Indiefest (2004)
- Telluride Indiefest (2004)
- Everett Women's Film Festival (2004)
- Martha's Vineyard Independent Film Festival (2004)
- Docuclub Completed Work Series (2004)
- Directors Series At New York University (2003)
- Mill Valley Film Festival (2003)
- Silverdocs Documentary Films Festival/American Film Institute (World premiere, 2003)

Community Outreach: P.O.V. is working with public television stations and national and community-based groups across the country to foster community dialogue around the issues presented in **A Family Undertaking**. For a list of upcoming screening and discussion events, go to <http://www.pbs.org/pov/utills/povnews.html#events>.

P.O.V. is also working with nationally recognized media educator Dr. Faith Rogow to develop a lesson plan and a facilitation guide to help event organizers carry out substantive and sensitive discussions around the film's content. The guide contains discussion questions and background information on the issues. In addition, the American Library Association and P.O.V. are creating a multi-media resource list of related fiction and non-fiction books, websites and videos that further explore the issues in the film. The materials will be available free of charge at [www.pbs.org/pov/outreach](http://www.pbs.org/pov/outreach).

On P.O.V. Interactive: Access the **A Family Undertaking** website at [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov) to find answers to your questions about home funerals and to explore the history of the American way of death.

### **Ask an Expert**

Got a question about home funerals or the funeral industry? Our panel of guides and advocates from the Funeral Consumers Alliance, Final Passages, and the Funeral Ethics Organization are here to answer it.

### **Photo Gallery – Gone But Not Forgotten**

Photographing a loved one after their death was common practice in the 19th and 20th centuries, an integral part of the mourning and memorializing process. These images recall a time when death played a more visible role in day-to-day life and provide context to reflect on current attitudes about death in American society.

### **Interactive Timeline – Dying in America: A Chronology**

Trace the evolution of the American way of death from the colonial days through the present. Along the way you'll find changes in beliefs about death and grief, the emergence of the funeral industry, developments in the field of medicine, and the impact of war.

### **Resources**

Find out more about your legal rights pertaining to home death care and what's involved in planning a home funeral. Learn about a variety of cultural death customs and explore related PBS and NPR websites.

About P.O.V.:

Now in its 17th season on PBS, P.O.V. is the first and longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's most innovative documentary storytellers. Bringing over 200 award-winning films to millions nationwide, and now a new Web-only series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent non-fiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Educational Foundation of America, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for *Talking Back* and *P.O.V.'s Borders: Environment* ([www.pbs.org/pov/borders](http://www.pbs.org/pov/borders)) is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Support for P.O.V. is provided by Starbucks Coffee Company. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations including KCET/Los Angeles, WGBH/Boston, and WNET/New York. Cara Mertes is executive director of P.O.V., which is a division of American Documentary, Inc.

Facts about  
Funerals in America:

- "In the U.S. alone about 650,000 people are cremated every year and 1.8 million buried in coffins – generating a total of \$10 billion a year for the funeral industry." (Source: "All the Rage in the US," by Christopher Swann, *Financial Times*, July 10, 2004)
- "Cremations were done for more than 27 percent of all deaths in 2002, at an average cost of \$1,000 to \$1,200 and the Cremation Association of North America estimates the share will climb to 39 percent by 2010.

According to the National Funeral Directors, the share will climb to 39 percent by 2010. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the average cost for a burial with a coffin in September 2003 was \$5,394.24." (Source: "Seeking Harmony in A Final Return to the Land," by Julie Dunn, *The New York Times*, January 11, 2004)

- "Very few Americans opt for funerals in their homes – there's no firm number of how many, exactly but interest is growing as consumers yearn for a more personal way to bid their loved ones adieu, and are frustrated by sometimes high-priced, cookie-cutter services. . . .Funerals in the home were commonplace before the Civil War and the introduction of embalming, which preserved the soldiers' bodies making long journeys home. Hospitals eventually displaced homes as the main place where people died, and funeral homes became popular in the early 20th century. . . . Funeral directors say the increased interest in home funerals is part of a larger trend to personalize last rites." (Source: "Simple funerals in the home begin to make a comeback," Matt Sedesky, *Associated Press*, May 10, 2004)
- Home funerals are legal in all states. However, the following states have conditions or specific exceptions that can make it more difficult to have a home funeral: Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey and New York. (Source: Funeral Consumers Alliance, [www.funerals.org/caring.htm](http://www.funerals.org/caring.htm))

**To download additional press materials, transcripts and color art visit P.O.V.'s online pressroom at [www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom](http://www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom).**