POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Seven Songs for a Long Life
A Film by Amy Hardie

www.pbs.org/pov
I came to Strathcarron Hospice with strict instructions: “Hang around.” As an artist in a medical establishment, you get good at hanging around. Feeling useless becomes your evolving art form. Finally, the patients took pity on me. Maybe they were feeling a bit useless, too. Disease can do that. Then they started singing to the camera. I loved it! Myself, I was banned from the singing circle in nursery school. But the songs that came from the patients at Strathcarron were so full of passion, dreams, anger, regret, acceptance—I felt it was their whole lives tunneling into the camera microphone. We started making little music films together—three minutes, five minutes, interspersing the songs with observational footage of their time in the hospice and at home. The requests came in thick and fast and I learned an interesting thing—when you’ve been told you have a disease that is going to kill you, you don’t waste time. And you want pleasure. To receive it and to give it.

Time is one of the greatest gifts someone can give you. When you sit with someone you are giving them your time. I spent four years filming in Strathcarron, listening, watching and taking up time from the patients and the staff. Sometimes there was a sense of urgency—if someone is in pain then each second of pain is a second too long. Sometimes time looped back on itself and we were transported by a song back into someone’s childhood, or their first love, or the moment they lost their spouse. Julie, one of the patients who had been told she had months to live, existed firmly in the moment. As the moments stretched into months, and then years, she had a rethink. She dyed her hair blonde and went back to work, fell in love, got married. Is she scared of dying? Not anymore; she is ready. How long is a good marriage? How long is a long life? As Dorene says after her successful stem cell treatment, “This treatment has given me five years—and five years is a long time.”

I brought in a music facilitator for the last year of filming. It created a fantastic buzz as the patients and staff heard themselves reach new levels of power in their songs. It was Hilary’s first time in a hospice and, as I had been, she was apprehensive before she arrived. Once she had met the patients and staff, however, we embarked on a shared journey that included laughter, tears, cake and comedy. The patients grew to have absolute trust that Hilary would help them find their best voices. I love it that Nicola changed the last word of the last chorus in the film—it is a confident expression of who she is, and what is happening to her. She ends the film with an invitation to the audience to “dream a little dream for me.” It makes me cry.

These are extraordinary moments, or maybe they are ordinary moments. Certainly the people in the film are ordinary, everyday heroes. That’s as true for the staff as for the patients. It was a privilege to be allowed to “hang out” for four years. There is a lovely story that Fionn mac Cumhailt, the legendary Irish chieftain, asked his warriors to tell him what sound they thought was the best music. They came up with many examples, but he kept shaking his head. Then he said to them, “The music of what happens, that is the sweetest music in the world.” I think that sums up perfectly the interplay of observational life and song in this film.

Amy Hardie
Director/Producer, Seven Songs for a Long Life
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Amy Hardie
Director/Producer, Seven Songs for a Long Life
Hospice care is rarely associated with singing and laughter, but at Strathcarron it’s different. At this remarkable Scottish hospice center, patients face the impending end of life with song and humor. Four years in the making, Seven Songs for a Long Life (60 min.) follows six patients and a couple of caregivers, all ready to belt out a tune and fill the hallways with music. Singing unlocks patients’ pasts, provides connection to staff and family and helps everyone navigate their anxieties as they reflect on life, love and mortality.

During the years of filming, each patient deals with enormous change. They share tender, vulnerable and funny moments as they go through the little and big dramas of trying to make a will, medicate pain, find a guardian for a child, cope with the passing of friends and loved ones and sometimes just get through the day. They wrestle with uncertainty as recent medical advances make it possible for some—but not all—to live for years rather than months after terminal diagnoses. This documentary and the remarkable people it features illuminate a journey we will all take eventually and show how the songs we love best can help guide us.
Seven Songs for a Long Life is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Caregivers and families in which one person has a life-limiting diagnosis
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to death and dying or the power of music, including Thank You for Playing (POV 2016), The Genius of Marian (POV 2014), The Self-Made Man (POV 2005), A Family Undertaking (POV 2004) and Sweet Old Song (POV 2002).
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section
- Senior centers and convalescent and nursing homes
- Hospice staff and volunteers
- Medical professionals specializing in gerontology or palliative care
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Public policymakers, advocates and elected officials
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries
- Your local PBS station

Seven Songs for a Long Life is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- aging
- cancer
- caregiving
- death and dying
- end-of-life care
- end-of-life decisions
- gerontology
- grief
- health and wellness
- hospice
- medicine
- multiple sclerosis
- music
- music therapy
- nursing
- palliative care
- terminal illness

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use Seven Songs for a Long Life to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pov.org/engage
About Strathcarron Hospice

The hospice featured in the film, Strathcarron Hospice, is located in Denny, Scotland, and serves 300 day patients and 14 residential patients. Strathcarron’s mission is to provide specialist palliative care services and expert end-of-life care. The center cares for people with illnesses that cannot be cured, including cancer and respiratory, heart and neurological diseases. Activity focuses on patients, families and caregivers. Strathcarron Hospice is a charity and its services are provided free of charge wherever they are needed—in people’s own homes, in hospitals and care homes and in the hospice in Denny.

Strathcarron employs a team of professionals who focus not only on the physical needs of patients, but also on the social, spiritual and emotional aspects of experiencing illness.

Source

Strathcarron Hospice. “Vision and Values.”
http://strathcarronhospice.net/vision-and-values/
Key Terms

Caring: Broadly, there are two approaches to end of life from the viewpoint of a caregiver. When the caring model of dying is used, caregivers approach end of life as its own life stage, with separate needs, options and goals. This model can empower caregivers to help patients be comfortable and make decisions about their care, as well as providing physical, emotional and spiritual support.

Curing: The curing model, or medical model, of dying focuses on delivering every possible treatment that may cure or alleviate the disease. When curing the disease is no longer possible, caregivers can seem to give up, or pull away from patients. This can trigger feelings of fear and anxiety, negatively affecting end of life experiences.

Hospice: Hospice is palliative care specifically for patients whose disease is progressive and life-limiting. It can take place in a facility or at home.

Palliative care: Care given to a patient with a chronic, progressive or terminal illness that is not intended to be curative, but rather focuses on pain management, quality of life and other physical, emotional and spiritual goals of the patient. Palliative care can begin at the time of diagnosis and proceed in tandem with treatment.

Sources

HCPPro. “End-of-Life Care.”
www.hcpro.com/content/40619.pdf

MedlinePlus. “What Is Palliative Care?”
https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000536.htm

Dorene prepares to sing.
Photo courtesy of Amy Hardie

DISCUSSION GUIDE
Seven Songs for a Long Life
Selected People Featured in *Seven Songs for a Long Life*

**Tosh** – uses Sinatra songs to charm everyone he meets

**Dorene** – a star in the world of amateur opera diagnosed with bone cancer that led to damage of her vertebrae and required back surgery to alleviate pain

**Iain** – a champion speedway racer diagnosed with multiple sclerosis

**Julie** – diagnosed with cancer at 23, she nonetheless cares for her young daughter and surprises herself by marrying a man she met at church and having a baby
Selected People Featured in *Seven Songs for a Long Life*

**Nicola** – a hairdresser whose priority is family; they provide her strength (and distraction) as she battles cancer

**Alicia** – a retired midwife and current TV shopping addict with cancer

**Mandy** – the palliative care nurse whose ability to draw out patients through music is one of the inspirations for this film

**Jim** – a former cruise ship jeweler and pianist who raises the funds needed to keep the hospice afloat
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- What did you learn from this film?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- Did you see anything familiar in the film? Did anything “speak truth” to you or especially resonate with your own experience?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or inspiring. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

To help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus of the discussion from the film to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to __________.
Seeing Yourself in Their Shoes

What do you have in common with the people at Strathcarron Hospice? How are you different?

Julie says, “I’m trying to hold on to time. Each day just gets quicker and quicker.” What sorts of things influence your own sense of time? What do you think would change for you if you knew that you had very little time left?

Mandy observes, “People generally are scared of... pain. They’re scared of the process of dying. They don’t know how they’ll die or what it involves.” What else did you notice about end-of-life issues that scared the people in the film? What frightens you?

A nurse observes that one of the biggest fears she encounters from patients arriving at the in-patient unit “is they think they aren’t going to get home again.” Where would you like to be at the end of life and why? What are the advantages and disadvantages of dying at home? What about dying in a hospital or other institution?

Music

Both Iain and Mandy describe singing as a social activity. How does singing help people connect? How does it help Mandy to be a better nurse?

People in the film choose a wide range of music, from contemporary pop to traditional folk and lots in between. What songs give you comfort? Hope? Joy?
Coping with Fear and Uncertainty

Tosh resists the social worker’s attempt to get him to plan for the end, saying, “To be quite honest with you I don’t want to know anything about it.” What do you suppose the impact would be on family and staff if all the patients in the film were in denial?

More than two years have passed since Julie was told that she had only months to live. She says, “I really believe that’s a lot to do with the church as well, and all their prayers. Definitely all their prayers.” What role do you see faith playing in people’s ability to cope with adversity? What are some other sources of strength and support that are found in people’s lives?

Julie says she gets “quite anxious sometimes just thinking about it, thinking, ‘What’s happening inside?’ and ‘What does it look like?’ and ‘Is it getting bigger?’” How do our visualizations influence our ability to cope? What sorts of visualization techniques might be used to provide a sense of control and counteract anxiety?

Julie ponders the possibility of returning to work, noting that even though it might be taxing, “If you’re not working, sometimes it can make you feel worse.” If you were unable to work, where might you find an alternate sense of purpose, value or identity?

Responses to Illness

Nicola says, “We tolerate the cancer, we fit it in, but our life is first and it’s second.” What did you learn from the film about living with a terminal illness (not just dying from it)?

Iain describes being “hit really hard” when he first found out he had multiple sclerosis and learned how it would limit his physical abilities. He recalls, “You sort of say to yourself, ‘What have I done to deserve this?’” How would you respond to someone who expressed self-blame for their illness?

Despite pain, loss of independence, loss of work or friends or purpose and finding themselves in a situation in which—as
Mandy notes—it would be easy to give up, the people in the film have lived with their terminal illnesses for years. What do you think accounts for their resilience and refusal to give in to disease?

Julie observes, "When you're living with a long-term illness you think, 'Well, at least I can have time to say goodbye,' and do the things you want to do, whereas other people don't get that chance. But on the other hand, unfortunately, depression sets in. Because you're not doing your usual things." What do you notice about how these patients cope with depression? How does the care they are receiving from the hospice help?

Do you see any gender differences in how people handle seeking help, maintaining social ties, fighting their diseases and so on?

Iain says, "When you get MS you get disconnected from everybody because all your friends disappear." How could you continue to be present as a friend for a person with a terminal illness, even if the illness prevented them from engaging in the activities that initially brought you together (like racing for Iain)?

**Family Issues**

Nicola says she doesn't remember all the pain, but her family does. How does the impact of a terminal illness diagnosis extend beyond the immediate patient to affect family, friends and colleagues?

Nicola says, "I keep telling them, 'No, I can do this bit by myself. No, I can do that by myself.' You know, because they keep trying to do things for me." Is there something selfless about allowing others to care for you? What do loved ones get from the experience? At what point is assistance more debilitating than it is helpful?

Mandy wonders where some of her patients get their strength and wonders whether sometimes it comes from "the sheer love of family." What role do you think family plays in resilience?

Alicia’s son places a block on her credit card to prevent her
DISCUSSION PROMPTS

from buying more things from online and TV shopping channels. What would you do if Alicia were your mother? How much discretion should people have to spend their money, even if those who care about them find their expenditures silly or unwise?

Iain tells Julie, “You’ve got to sometimes think about yourself as well. You can’t always think about other people all the time.” How would you help someone balance the desire to meet others’ needs and the need to prioritize one’s own well-being?

Nicola says, “I always thought that I’ve got forever, or as long as everybody else. I’d never thought that far ahead. I did say to my husband once that we have to remember that we’re creating memories for the children.” If you were in Nicola’s situation, what sorts of memories would you want to create for your children or grandchildren before the end of your life? Do the memories you listed differ from the ones you’d list if you weren’t nearing the end of your life?

Medicine: What Counts as Care?

Mandy recalls, “When I started nursing I thought I wanted to do very technical intensive care, that sort of really high-tech nursing… [Until I] realized the more I did that the more I wanted to take machines off people, and the wires off people, and just get back to the actual person that was lying in the bed.” In what ways does medical technology benefit us and in what ways does it create problems or hamper care?

Mandy says, “I think the skills that we have developed here as nurses are those of not wanting to fix everything. We can’t fix everything and what we have to learn to do is listen, really listen, listen properly.” How would you change medical training to respond to Mandy’s insight?

We see some of the patients interact with children in their lives. How do you think the experience of disease and hospice care appears through a child’s eyes?
Public Policy

What would it take for everyone to have access to a facility like Strathcarron? Is universal access a goal that should be incorporated into public policy?

Jim explains, “We’re partly funded by the NHS [National Health Service], about thirty odd per cent, and then we have to make up the rest ourselves... Every day, actually, we have to raise a bit more than ten thousand pounds. Every single day. Seven days a week, 365 days a year.” Ideally, how do you think resources like Strathcarron would be funded? What’s the role of government funding in that picture?

Iain and his wife, Moyra, need to move into a different house to accommodate his increasing physical limitations. She notes that they are already experiencing financial hardship because, “Well, obviously, we were used to an income, and it was a healthy wage he used to get, [compared] to just going onto benefits.” In your view, what’s the best way for society to address financial hardships and/or special housing needs of people with debilitating illnesses?

Julie is careful to take steps to ensure the future security of her young daughter. What sorts of support should communities (including schools and government agencies) be prepared to provide for children whose parents live with and ultimately die from terminal illnesses?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
Volunteer as someone who can listen, talk, cook, make crafts or bring music to hospices, rehab centers, convalescent homes and/or hospitals.

Create a booth for local fairs to distribute information about local end-of-life choices and making wills. Consider inviting legal professionals and notaries to donate services and help staff the booth.

One thing in the film that helps people cope with fear is to make plans and prepare for likely events. Use the film to make a checklist of things that might worry you and, together with family and caregivers, make your own plans in the event of terminal illness for:
- pain management
- limited mobility
- loss of independence/ability to care for self
- financial security of surviving family (and, in the case of minor children, who will take guardianship)
- medical directives (e.g., do not resuscitate orders)
- funeral arrangements

If you don’t already have one, write a will (or make sure your existing will is current).

Hold a fundraising concert for a local hospice. Invite hospice residents and staff to suggest their favorite tunes for inclusion in the program.

Engage policymakers in a conversation about the government’s role in establishing public policy that eases end-of-life decisions and funds end-of-life and palliative care options.

Contribute to the #MyLastSong initiative by selecting your song, then recording a video and uploading it to the film website: http://www.sevensongsfilm.com/mylastsong

Screen the film and host a workshop on end-of-life planning after the film using the workshop guide available with the educational edition of the film, which you can purchase here: http://www.sevensongsfilm.com/edu

Lead the audience engagement workshop created by the director of Seven Songs for a Long Life. The workshop aims to use the energy created from the film to power audience members’ individual reflections. A short animation explaining the workshop is available here: http://www.sevensongsfilm.com/workshops. The workshop asks audience members to discuss the following questions in pairs:
- What counts as a good day for you?
- What values, or qualities, in your own life would you like to be remembered for (your legacy)?
- What do you do at the moment that shows those values?
- Imagine you have been given a life-limiting diagnosis. Would you change what you do?
**FILM-RELATED WEB SITES**

**SEVEN SONGS**  
www.sevensongsfilm.com  
The film’s official website includes information on the film and cast, Dying Matters Awareness Week events in the UK and a guide to hosting workshops.

**Original Online Content on POV**

To further enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The *Seven Songs for a Long Life* website—www.pbs.org/pov/sevensongs—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with Amy Hardie; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features.

**Hospice**

**AMERICAN MUSIC THERAPY ASSOCIATION**  
www.musictherapy.org  
This group’s website includes explanations, research and resources related to the use of music to manage stress and pain, promote wellness and express emotion.

**END OF LIFE: HELPING WITH COMFORT AND CARE**  
This National Institutes of Health resource includes a helpful chart comparing hospice with palliative care and a set of questions to ask to aid the decision-making process.

**HOSPICE**  
www.hospicenet.org  
This website serves as an information clearinghouse for patients and families coping with terminal illness.

**MEDICINE PLUS**  
www.medlineplus.gov/hospicecare.html  
This U.S. government site focuses on information about end-of-life care and provides definitions, research, links to resources and more.

**Scottish Documentary Institute**

Established in 2004 by Noe Mendelle to nurture documentary filmmakers and audiences in Scotland and beyond, SDI specialises in documentary training, production and distribution, supporting filmmakers through its diverse programme of international activities and high quality training programmes.
HOW TO BUY THE FILM


POV

Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 36 Emmy® Awards, 19 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®: the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Curated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department created PBS’s first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. POV Digital continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the POV Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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You can follow us on Twitter @POVengage for the latest news from POV Community Engagement & Education.

Front cover: Julie and Mandy.
Photo courtesy of Murdo MacLeod