End-of-Life Issues Get an Airing on Prime-Time TV

Encouraging accurate portrayal of end-of-life issues in movies and television

SUMMARY

In 1999 and 2000, W.E. Duke & Company, Los Angeles, (a subcontractor hired by the communications firm of Barksdale Ballard & Company, Vienna, Va.) worked with the Writers Project of the Last Acts® campaign to educate creative decision-makers within the entertainment industry on the need to portray end-of-life issues accurately.

Last Acts is a national communications campaign funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to mobilize professional and consumer organizations in efforts to improve end-of-life care.

The project was part of the RWJF program, Targeted End-of-Life Projects Initiative.

Key Results

The project accomplished the following:

- Briefings with key writers and producers of the prime-time television programs ER, Gideon's Crossing, City of Angels and Strong Medicine led to six end-of-life story lines aired during the grant period.

- The Writers Project provided a technical advisor to work with HBO in their film adaptation of "Wit," the Pulitzer Prize-winning play that portrays the difficulties of terminal illness in modern medicine.

- The plenary session on end-of-life issues at the October 1999 Soap Summit in New York reached an audience of 85 writers, producers and researchers for daytime television programs.

- Through its networking activities, the project expanded its constituent list of interested writers, producers, directors and researchers to more than 350.
**Funding**

RWJF supported the project with a grant of $150,250 between October 1999 and September 2000.

**THE PROBLEM**

"National surveys have shown that daytime and prime-time viewers pay attention to the health information in TV shows, learn from it, act on it, and share the information with others," the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report on their website. Using television and film to depict accurately how the end of life is treated can dispel myths and help people understand their choices and ask for more humane options.

**CONTEXT**

*Last Acts* is a national coalition of organizations engaged in a public engagement campaign to improve care for people who are dying and their families. The *Last Acts* website is no longer available. *Last Acts* created the Writers Project in 1998 to help the entertainment media produce accurate, compelling stories about the many issues surrounding death in modern America. RWJF awarded this grant under the **Targeted End-of-Life Projects Initiative**, to support solicited and unsolicited projects under $1 million that are consistent with RWJF’s end-of-life strategic objectives. RWJF has three strategic objectives in its end-of-life grantmaking:

- To improve the knowledge and capacity of health care professionals and others to care for the dying.
- To improve the institutional environment in health care institutions and in public policies and regulatory apparatus to enable better care of the dying.
- To engage the public and professionals in efforts to improve end-of-life care.

The Writers Project initiative fits within the third objective.

**THE PROJECT**

Under a subcontract with Barksdale Ballard, staff at W.E. Duke (a Los Angeles-based public relations firm with experience in the entertainment industry) engaged in a number of activities to educate television writers, producers and other entertainment professionals about end-of-life issues. Staff at W.E. Duke organized meetings, seminars and briefings and updated the Writers Project section of the *Last Acts* website.
RESULTS

The project accomplished the following:

- **Briefings with key writers and producers of the prime-time television programs** *ER, Gideon's Crossing, City of Angels* and *Strong Medicine* led to six end-of-life story lines aired during the grant period. Four story lines appeared on *ER*. For one *ER* episode, *Last Acts* (through a contract with Burness Communications as part of RWJF grant ID# 038721) conducted an outreach and promotional effort, which included advertising, a toll-free call-in line for viewers and suggestions to NBC-affiliate news directors for local stories and experts on end-of-life issues.

- **The Writers Project provided a technical advisor to work with HBO in their film adaptation of "Wit," the Pulitzer Prize-winning play that portrays the difficulties of terminal illness in modern medicine.** Linda Schickedanz, an oncology nurse, spent three months on the set of "Wit," instructing actors on medical procedures, advising Emma Thompson on her character's physical descent and advising the production design team on machines and instruments that would have been used around 1990. The program aired in March 2001.

- **The plenary session on end-of-life issues at the October 1999 Soap Summit in New York reached an audience of 85 writers, producers and researchers for daytime television programs.** The session featured talks by the Rev. Charles Meyer, then chaplain of St. David's Medical Center (Austin, Texas) and author of *The Good Death: Challenges, Choices and Care Options*; and Robert Potter, MD, of the Midwest Bioethics Center in Kansas City. The project coordinated a four-person panel on end-of-life issues for the Summit. Contacts made with the creative staffs of several shows led to the development of a special initiative targeting daytime programs. (Population Communications International, a nonprofit organization that works with the media and others to encourage people to make choices that lead to better health and sustainable development, presents the Soap Summit each year. RWJF gave partial support to the 1997 Soap Summit under grant ID# 032840.)

- **The project re-filmed Rev. Meyer's plenary talk as a 10-minute videotape to use in briefing writers and producers.**

- **Through its networking activities, the project expanded its constituent list of interested writers, producers, directors and researchers to more than 350.** These constituents receive regular mailings containing information about accurate portrayal of end-of-life themes. By November 2003, the constituent list of entertainment professionals briefed by the Writers Project had reached 1,200.

- **Project staff updated the Writers Project section of the *Last Acts* website with fact sheets matched with real-life story lines.** A key portal for entertainment writers looking for information and story ideas concerning terminal illness and death, the website generated the majority of calls for information and guidance that the Writers Project received.
Communications

The Writers Project publicized its services through briefings, video presentations, conferences and other networking events, and through its section on the Last Acts website. Ongoing consultation with writers and producers of prime-time programs led to the airing of several stories about end-of-life issues, including one on Strong Medicine in 2000.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are two lessons for the field from the project:

1. It takes time to gain the trust of people in the entertainment industry. Over time, the Writer’s Project has established itself as a service organization that provides valuable information, rather than as an advocate for a particular point of view. The number of writers and producers consulting the Writers Project has grown accordingly. (Subcontractor/Duke)

2. Because television shows and writers change constantly, working within the entertainment industry requires flexibility and tenacity. With more than 1,200 television and film production companies and some 6,000 members of the Writers' Guild (who often work at home or in small offices), it is challenging to establish and maintain strong working relationships in the entertainment field. (Project Director/Reller, Subcontractor/Duke)

AFTERWARD

The Writers Project discontinued the initiative targeting daytime programs after one year because of poor results, according to the subcontractor. In March 2000, W.E. Duke received an 18-month grant from RWJF to develop the framework for an organization to provide the entertainment industry with accurate information and resources on health and healthcare (see the Program Results Report on ID# 038104). Last Acts sponsored the March 2001 premiere of "Wit", and subsequently funded the Wit Film Project directed by the University of California, Los Angeles, Medical School (both projects funded under grant ID# 043719 in the Targeted End-of-Life Projects Initiative), in which the film is used to teach medical students about end-of-life care.

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