

Richland Speaks on Compassion and Choices for Village Quarterly Meeting

By Jane Guttman

Jud Richland, Beachway Drive, spoke about “Compassion and Choices” at the March 20 Quarterly Meeting of Lake Barcroft Village. Jud volunteers as the Northern Virginia coordinator for the Compassion and Choices organization, which advocates for improved care and end-of-life options.

To highlight the issue, Jud’s colleague Sara Stern spoke about her husband’s passing, which did not go as he had wished. Her husband, for 42 years a tubist with the National Symphony Orchestra, voluntarily stopped eating and drinking when he decided he wished to die, since there were no other options available to him in Virginia. Ms. Stern said that dying from dehydration was “unspeakable” and urged the listeners: “It’s important to push so people can die in a humane manner if they have the mental capacity to make the decision.”

Jud Richland explained that there are seven places where aid in dying is legal: Vermont, Washington, Oregon, California, Colorado, Montana and the District of Columbia. Jud noted “We can extend life but procedures don’t necessarily make the dying process better.” He said that most people want the same things at the end of life, to die at home and with loved ones nearby, without pain, with their spiritual needs respected, and without becoming a burden on their loved ones.

Presently, one in ten Americans has surgery in the last week of life; less than 40% die at home; and most die in the hospital or in long-term care, often after “unnecessary and painful treatment.” Jud sees two major causes for these statistics. The first is what he calls “perverse incentives in health care” because doctors and hospitals practice “defensive medicine” so no one can say they didn’t do everything they could and because medical practitioners are paid for services delivered. Also, he notes, there is a lack of communication and coordination among the medical professionals attending to the patient. Second, people don’t proactively do what they can earlier in life, such as completing the state-approved documents for types of care or refusal for resuscitation. He recommends that people become informed about “end of life choices,” complete the legal forms, and “have an ‘end of life’ conversation” with the family and the doctor.

The current end of life options in Virginia are: all treatment intervention; refusal of medical treatment; voluntarily stopping food and drink; palliative care; terminal sedation. Jud asked, “What right don’t you have?” and responded “To die peacefully, at the time and place of your choosing.”

The Compassion and Choices Facebook page can be found at:

<https://www.facebook.com/CompassionandChoices/>.