

COMMENTARY ON NANCY'S SITUATION

by Judith Snow

Nancy B has the right to die ... I agree. But I don't think that's the issue. The debate is about dying, but Nancy is living with a severe physical disability ... like me and hundreds of other Canadians. Nancy has been made into a pawn for all the people who are interested in the issue of euthanasia.

For months lawyers, doctors, courtroom clerks and reporters have discussed and debated euthanasia. Think about it ... all that time, energy and money. Just imagine what would have happened if all those people with all those resources got together with Nancy ... and figured how she could live. All it takes is a good wheelchair, a portable ventilator, a willing attendant and a van. Then nothing could stop her from doing whatever she wants. That's what I do.

I've spent my life in a wheelchair, with quadraplegia. For the first thirty years I was told I was dying. I'm now forty-two and healthy as a horse. But people in the medical establishment didn't see me that way. Sixteen years ago they put me in a chronic care hospital ... after I graduated from university ... and kept me there for three and a half years. While I was there, I almost died of malnutrition.

No one helped me to find a way back into the community, into a job and into an active life. In the hospital I lost my spirit. They wouldn't feed me enough, I didn't insist and I start to let myself die. As I became sick and malnourished the doctors would not treat my real illness ... the indifference of the system to my needs. All they would give me was oxygen. But it was that brush with death, that brought back my fighting spirit. With the support of my family and friends we broke the political barrier and got me funding for my own attendant support system. Today I'm still alive, fully employed and living in my own home in the community.

Lying on your back for months at a time in an intensive care unit is enough to convince anyone that you are dying. Quebec is the province where they have the best attendant care in Canada. Does Nancy know about it? Forgive me if I suspect that the health professionals haven't exerted themselves enough to show Nancy what's possible.

I can't imagine that Nancy knows anything about how to live as a person with a severe physical disability. I've had a lifetime to learn how to use my wheelchair and my attendant care to my best advantage. As a recently disabled person, there's no way that Nancy can understand what the real problems are that she will face ... or what the real possibilities are that she can take part in.

I think we should insist that she try living and working, back in her own home, with a full set of services for at least six months. Then she can understand what's possible in her life now. After that if she still decides that her life is of no value, she can get someone to pull her plug.

For Commentary, this is Judith Snow, in Toronto.