

60 REASONS TO SUPPORT NEW YORK'S MEDICAL AID IN DYING ACT

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Reason #10

So those who believe in a loving god can deliver themselves into God's hands, exercising their own free will to end needless suffering.

John R. Ostwald, 69, died on October 19, 2019, after suffering through a horrendous year-long nightmare experience with stage 4 pancreatic cancer that rapidly metastasized to his lungs and liver, and finally his bones. A nagging backache was his only symptom.

He bought a few weeks of time by dutifully submitting to the rages of chemotherapy, which weakened his system. The drugs bound his bowels. He suffered long bouts of pneumonia and endured a chest tube insertion that poked through his lung to drain fluid. In his fifth hospital stay, he agonized through the discovery of blood clots in his lungs, which further labored his breathing.

John attended St. Anthony's School, LaSalle Institute, Hudson Valley Community College, and received his master's degree from Hofstra University. John was a Navy veteran of the Vietnam War era and was an advocate for veterans. He was a popular professor of psychology at Hudson Valley Community College and a columnist for The Record and Saratogian newspapers. He was a true humanitarian.

John enjoyed playing piano at local events and especially nursing homes, with his 94-year-old mom along to dance. John loved to play poker in local tournaments and he even made it to the Las Vegas World Series of Poker. He was generous with his time, and humor. A framed print of a man leaning on a headstone engraved with, "I only came here to laugh," was displayed prominently in his office.

John wrote a book: War, Sacrifice and Coming Home, for Soldier's Heart, a nonprofit organization assisting veterans, and was working on his second book. We lost a real hero when we lost John, and we were all blessed to know him.

John should have had the option to peacefully end his suffering on his own terms when it outweighed his immense joy in life.

John and I were grateful for the excellent care he received from healthcare providers who delivered palliative care, and thorough hospice services. But the fact is, John did not respond well to medication and was often agitated and remained in great pain.

He hallucinated and required restraint so he would not rip out his IV attached to the port in his chest through which he received various medications.

In the middle of the last week of his life, he was admitted to the ICU because we were told he could access stronger pain medications there. This is not the place where he wanted to spend the last few days of his life. Clearly, lucidly, and often, he said desperately to me and several nurses and doctors: "Please let me take a pill and end it. Please!" He stated his wishes simply. "I want to die and am ready. I want the choice to die when I say so."

John was baptized, confirmed, and was an Altar Boy at St. Anthony's of Padua Roman Catholic Church. He attended services regularly, and his cousin, Father Peter Russo, came to the hospital to see John and administered Last Rites. John believed strongly in free will and was vocal about injustice. When the injustice of an inhumane death presented itself to him, he reflected that God did not want him to continue his life here on earth. John, who was without hope and purpose, and suffering terribly and needlessly, was embracing his faith in its fullest glory, asking to be taken to heaven. We only wish he had had the option to end it by lawfully taking medication, on his own terms.

The Medical Aid in Dying Act would have given him that option. The bill would allow qualified, terminally ill adult residents of New York to legally obtain a prescription from their physician for medication to peacefully their suffering at the place and time of their choosing.

John knew that this option would have required long preparation — just in case — alongside the treatment he undertook. He would have been comforted by the fact that he had an 'out' — another possible option in the spectrum of ways to end his suffering given his terminal cancer.

Without this option, John's death was not peaceful. I helplessly held his hand as he suffocated in front of me, his body exhausted.

John Ostwald should have had a much better ending to his own story.

**To join our mission, email Amanda Cavanaugh
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