

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

## Lindsay Wright

Her husband, Youssef Cohen, was forced to choose between a painful death or leaving the home they shared

Manhattan, New York



### Reason #36

***So that no one has to leave the home they love, their family, and their friends to die on their own terms.***

I'm a New Yorker. So was my husband. He died in Oregon because New York State doesn't allow residents with terminal illnesses to choose how they will die and Oregon does.

Youssef, my husband, talked about death and life nearly every day since we met in 1984. The meaning of a good life and the inevitability of death were common topics.

While we focused on living, creating a family, and laying down roots in New York City, we knew death was always present and a possibility. Friends and relatives in Egypt and Brazil had already died, sometimes from disease, sometimes unexpectedly. So we created wills early in our marriage and identified guardians for our son. We signed advanced directives for our health care and made sure we always knew where our money was in case the other one died. We saved for a long retirement together.

When we learned, in 2012, that Youssef had incurable cancer, we were crushed. Mesothelioma is caused by exposure to asbestos and attacks the lining of the lungs.

We were not going to have a future together. Our conversations about life and death took on a new intensity and urgency.

He wanted to die a good death — peaceful and painless. We all want that, for ourselves and for the ones we love. But we knew that his would not be an easy death.

Instead, he would die of respiratory failure and suffocation, and likely in considerable pain. He had lived a full, meaningful, and self-directed life. Now, he wanted to choose how he would die. He didn't want to die in a hospital, and he also didn't want a long and drawn out death. He was going to die; it was only a matter of how and when. It also became a matter of where.

He was determined not to leave his own death to fate. He had long ago told me he wanted to die in Oregon and I promised to help him. How could I not?

In late March 2016 — nearly 4 years after his initial diagnosis and after many conventional and experimental interventions to prolong his life — his doctors told him he had little time to live. We had flown out to Portland only 3 weeks earlier, rented a furnished apartment, and established Youssef's residency. Now we felt time was fast running out. We made frantic calls to a Portland cancer center to convince them to accept his medical records, packed our suitcases, and flew to Oregon.

The next morning, he asked a local lung cancer doctor for aid-in-dying medication, but Youssef's health declined rapidly and he died only 6 days later, before he could get the aid-in-dying medication. Our son and his brother arrived only hours before his death.

Moving to Oregon was the hardest, most gut-wrenching thing I've ever done in my life.

We left behind our beloved New York City, our sunny apartment filled with years of memories, and all our dearest friends so that my husband could die the way he wanted to die. No one should have to move across the country just so they can control their own death.

Today three out of four New Yorkers — people from all walks of life, beliefs, and backgrounds — want better end-of-life options, including compassionate palliative care, fewer and less invasive end-of-life interventions, and more choice in how they will die, especially when they have a terminal illness. And they want that choice right here in New York where they live.

Dozens of friends and colleagues here in New York have told me they could never do what we did: Move to another state to die, far from friends and family.

The isolation, fear, and loneliness would be too great. They want to die at home. My husband wanted all those things, too, but, most of all, he didn't want to suffer in death and he didn't want us to watch him suffer either. He felt he had no choice.

Let's all talk about death. Let's all talk about how we want to die. New Yorkers deserve to have that choice right here in New York State.



To join our mission, email Amanda Cavanaugh at [acavanaugh@compassionandchoices.org](mailto:acavanaugh@compassionandchoices.org).

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