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He was 72 years old and dying; so he and his wife decided it would be better for him to pull the plug on himself

He Met With Death On His Own Terms

ANDREW McLELLAN didn't particularly want to die. But in his case, death was inevitable soon and he just refused to spend his remaining time living with pain, having little control over his deteriorating body and being confined to a sterile hospital room instead of relaxing with his wife and friends at home.

So on Jan. 11, Alexandria, Va., Circuit Court Judge Albert Grenadier wrote a landmark opinion that said, in part: "Mr. McLellan has the legal and moral right to make this decision. He has the unfettered right to control his own destiny.

"A competent, adult patient has the right to refuse treatment for himself. In this case, the court is of the opinion that the state's interest in preserving life, protecting innocent third parties, preventing suicide and maintaining the ethical integrity of the medical practice is overborne by Mr. McLellan's constitutional right of privacy and his right to individual free choice and self-determination."

In short, Judge Grenadier said Andrew McLellan could

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disconnect the kidney dialysis machines that were keeping him alive, leave the hospital's intensive-care unit, go home and die.

Which is what he did five days later.

And this column is about the reason he asked the court to grant him the right to live the way he wanted to live or not live at all, and the people around him who lived with the decision and its denouement.

"I never viewed it as a right-to-die case," said Gloria McLellan, Andrew's wife for 17 years. "It was always a fight to live. And we won."

McLellan was 72 years old and still active. For the past 20 years he had worked as an international representative of the AFL-CIO, organizing unions and investment programs for workers throughout Latin America. He smoked a ton of Cartons and had no intention of giving up the habit he had maintained for most of his adult life.

He had emphysema, but that didn't slow him down, either. Then he got sick. It was the evening of Nov. 3, Mrs. McLellan said, and Andrew complained of a backache. That was all. Just a persistent backache.

But it got worse. It kept him up most of the night, and by morning, the pains were severe. So she called an ambulance, and during the ride to Alexandria Hospital, they found out what the problem really was. A major blood vessel in his abdomen had become constricted and, during the ride, burst.

There followed a 10-hour operation and the transfusion of 64 pints of blood.

"His body began breaking down," Mrs. McLellan said. "They fixed the aneurism (rupture), but then infection set in, then pneumonia, then kidney failure, then gastrointestinal failure.

"He couldn't breathe, and they had him on a respirator. Then he developed more lung trouble, and they had to give him a tracheotomy (cut a hole in his windpipe to provide his lungs with oxygen through a tube).

"There was no sedation because his lungs were so weak. They were afraid that sedatives would interfere with his ability to breathe. He was in a lot of pain all of the time."

He was 55 when they got married, and she was 39. They were both mature and knew what they wanted in life. They were both Episcopalian, and believed that dying freed the soul

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for bigger and better things.

"We agreed when we first got married that we would not let each other stay on any artificial machinery beyond what was normal," she recalled.

"Everyone should fight to live, because there are things to do and places to go and jobs to finish. But when it is no longer a matter of prolonging life, but one of prolonging death, it is a time to stop and let go."

Andrew McLellan kept fighting for a long time. Despite the setbacks that caused dangerous heart palpitations on the three occasions when they tried to wean him from the respirator. "I knew after the third attempt that he wasn't going to make it," said Mrs. McLellan.

But she stayed there. He couldn't talk, so she devised a sign language for him.

"I drew up a list of statements and questions which he could point to," she said. "And then I had an alphabet. He could point to letters and spell out what he wanted."

Or, if he was too weak, she would point to a letter or phrase, and he would lift or shake a finger to indicate yes or no. A simple sentence could take 15 minutes to produce.

"It was painstaking," she said, "but I was so happy to be there to do it. All I could think was that when I wasn't there, he would want something and couldn't get it because no one else could really communicate with him."

And that went on past Thanksgiving and the Christmas rush and the actual holidays and the new year. And McLellan stayed on a series of machines, sometimes improving, and sometimes re-

gressing. Never leaving.

Then a night nurse asked him what he wanted, and he mouthed the words "I want to die."

It was after midnight, and the nurse called Mrs. McLellan.

"I went over to the hospital, and we talked all through the night through the code and that kind of ESP that husbands and wives have," she said.

"I asked him if he had given up all hope of getting better, and he said 'Yes.' I asked if he was afraid, and he said 'No.'

"And in the morning, I went home to shower and change clothes, and I remember that it was a bright sunny day and he was smiling as I left. He was happy because he wanted to die in the peace and quiet and dignity of his own home."

It was an unusual night, she said. They were seldom alone. Nurses don't usually leave people alone in intensive-care areas. But on this occasion, the staff stayed away and let the husband and wife work with their codes and touches and sign language to discuss their lives and the meaning of "till death do us part."

"I cried," she said, "but I wasn't hysterical. We reminisced about the things we had done. And I would miss him."

They called the hospital room when the decision was rendered, and "I don't know if we laughed or cried. We were so relieved to be released from prison, even if it was for just a few days."

So they put him into an ambulance, and crawled through the Virginia streets during a snowstorm — about

the same time that an Air Florida jet crashed into the Potomac River nearby.

"I asked him if he was happy, now," she said, "and he said he was overjoyed. He was at peace."

And four days later he went peacefully to sleep as he had on other nights in his bed, in his home, those who knew and loved him.

He did not wake up