Synopsis for *Stopping For Death: The Nurses of Wells House Hospice*, Multiple Lengths

25 word

A year following four hospice nurses who question their calling as they face emotional distress, financial hardships and the possible closure of their facility.

40 word

Four nurses at a residential hospice waver between fulfillment and despair, clashing with management and fighting budget cuts while trying to keep life as normal as possible for their dying patients.

100 words

*Stopping For Death* follows four people working a job few would desire: tending to the needs of the dying. They are nurses, but they are also therapists, entertainers, disciplinarians, and family to these patients.

Filmed at one of the only full-time residential hospices in the country, this film creates an authentic portrait of a day-in-the-life of the hospice. Off-the-cuff interviews with staff are at the heart of the film as they talk about burnout, budget cuts, and, more warmly, about their patients. These nurses waver between fulfillment and despair, clashing with management and fighting budget cuts while trying to keep life as normal as possible for their dying patients.

250 words

*Stopping For Death* follows four people working a job few would desire: tending to the needs of the dying. They are nurses, but they are also therapists, entertainers, disciplinarians, and family to these patients.

Judith, a veteran nurse, introduces us to Wells House, one of only a few residential hospices in the country. Judith claims that her work with the dying is the only thing that keeps her living. When a hospice nursing shortage hits though, Judith’s extra shifts and constant nights on call take their toll.

Curtis, a home health aide, left a nine-year career managing a Jack in the Box to join hospice. Aides do the dirty work: bathing the residents, feeding them, changing their diapers. Yet Curtis remains emotionally unattached and unfazed.

Cindy is blunt and sarcastic, ripping into families who reject patients because they are gay or former drug users. When patients begin dying in rapid succession during Cindy’s shifts she says, “I know that’s what they’re here to do, God, but could you spread them out a little?”

Diana, the Director of Nursing, has been at Wells House since its inception. As she struggles to hold the house together, the state proposes to eliminate hospice benefits for the poor. Then a Medicare snafu cuts funding, and David informs Diana that in addition to working 60 hours a week as Director, she must cover all open shifts. Diana must decide: should she risk her heath and sanity to care for her patients and staff?

500 word

*Stopping For Death* follows four people working a job few would desire: tending to the needs of the dying. They are nurses, but they are also therapists, entertainers, disciplinarians, and family to these patients.

Judith, a veteran nurse, introduces us to Wells House Hospice, one of only a few residential facilities in the country. As we follow Judith on her rounds, we see the personalities of the patients emerge. Judith claims that her work with the dying is the only thing that keeps her living. When the growing hospice nursing shortage starts to affect the house though, the administrators ask Judith to cover more and more shifts. Her work in the house and constant nights of being on call begin to take a dramatic toll.

Curtis, a home health aide, left a nine-year career managing a Jack in the Box to join hospice. Aides do the dirty work: bathing the residents, feeding them, and changing their diapers. Yet the strain of the job doesn’t tax Curtis as heavily as it does other staff. In fact, his breezy personality provides much of the comic relief in the film. His secret appears to be that he remains emotionally unattached to his patients. The laughter Curtis provokes reminds everyone that this is all just a part of life. “I shit, you shit, it’s all the same to me.”

Short-staffed, the house does not have time for their newest nurse, Cindy, to ease into the job. Cindy is blunt−the most outspoken nurse on staff. She is not afraid to air her disgust at families who reject patients because they are gay or former drug users. Only a few months into the job, patients begin to die in rapid succession during Cindy’s shifts. Cindy relies on her sarcasm to deal with the stress. “I know that’s what they are here to do, God, but could you just spread them out a little?”

Diana, the Director of Nursing, has been at Wells House since its inception. As an R.N. she understands the psychology of nurses and often has to quell conflicts between the staff and David, the Program Director. With Diana trying desperately to hold the house together, the staff is shaken by an announcement that the state is proposing to eliminate hospice benefits for the poor. Without this assistance, Wells House will be forced to refuse new admissions and make cutbacks, leading them to overwork the nurses they currently have.

Then, when a loophole in the Medicare system cuts funding to Wells, David informs Diana that in addition to working 60 hours a week as the Director of Nursing, she must also cover all open shifts. Diana finds herself faced with a decision: should she risk her heath and sanity to continue to care for her patients and staff?

*Stopping for Death* captures a year in the life of this facility focusing on the nurses and how they care for their terminal patients. This documentary has a classical narrative structure and memorable characters. Though the subject matter is serious there is a lot of levity. The nurses act as our guide into a world that few people get a chance to glimpse.

Director’s Bio:

A native Chicagoan, Wendy graduated magna cum laude from the production program at the USC's School of Cinematic Arts. She spent 14 years in independent film, working in virtually every department. Leaving the daily grind of production work, she decided to focus on her own projects as well as making documentary films for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

She has written and produced numerous short films that have shown at film festivals across the country. Wendy completed her first feature length documentary on hospice nurses in 2013 and continues to work on a comedic short film series based on the five stages of grief. The first film in this series, 'Stage One' is distributed by Ouat Media and was acquired by Movieola for television broadcast.

She also has a passion for audio, and with the group Higher Mammals has contributed to NPR's All Thing's Considered, Day to Day and Radio Lab. She is developing a Science Podcast for kids called Shabam and an Audio Book with Chicago Musician Chris Connelly, which will be released in 2014. Wendy currently teaches Cinema at DePaul University in Chicago, IL.

Director’s Statement:

“Man, that shit’s hard to watch.” Mel Herbert, an emergency-room doctor—and good friend of mine—upon viewing a rough cut.

Hard to watch. That was about the last thing I wanted or expected Mel to say to me. After all, my great hovering fear for five years now has been that I had done the most illogical thing a filmmaker could do: choose a subject because it was something nobody wanted to think about, talk about, or look at.

But that was not, it turned out, what Mel meant. Mel meant it was hard for him, personally, to watch because of the heroism of the nurses. They made him feel like he, an emergency-room doctor, was living selfishly, not doing enough to help people, and made him feel sad, too, that these people were doing such an important thing with so little acknowledgment or support that their vocation sometimes came to seem like punishment.

The nurses at Wells House Hospice, where my producer and I spent a year shooting, seemed to me to be camped out at a border, not so much standing guard there as standing at attention. They are camped there with a bunch of outcasts, attending to them in the last weeks, days, hours and minutes of their lives, because if they don’t nobody else will. Attention must be paid, Linda Loman says of her husband halfway through “Death of a Salesman,” and that’s all there is to it, in the end. Maybe that should be the great hovering fear over all of us: that if we cannot find the attention and concern—the humanity—to do something as vital, intimate and essential as watch over the dying, do we really have any chance at all?

Press and Reviews:

From Doxa:

This is documentary at its most raw, captured as life and death unfold inside Wells House Hospice, one of the only full-time residential hospices in the US. The film follows four people working a job few would desire: tending to the needs of the dying. To be very clear, this is a film that deals honestly and bluntly with people in the final stages of their lives. Scenes of people in the process of dying are often startling. Despite this, *Stopping for Death* is not a depressing film. It is hard, harsh, extremely sad, but also irreverent, humble, and even funny. Drug addiction, homelessness, and disease have been the reality for many of the patients here. Abandoned by family, friends and almost entirely by society, Wells House offers a place of acceptance and love for the people no one else wants.

The gritty camera work, and the loud background hum of life-support machines create an authentic portrait of a day-in-the-life of the hospice. Off-the-cuff interviews with staff are at the heart of the film as they talk about burnout, budget cuts, and, more warmly, about their patients. It is hard to leave this film and not have the people who staff and run the hospice embedded in your mind. Whether it’s sharing a smoke out on the patio, complaining about shift work or the vagaries of the medical system, these caustic, compassionate characters, dressed in scrubs emblazoned with Looney Tunes, are utterly indelible. In spite of the challenges, the Wells House nurses carry out the work of aiding the dying with grace, humility and courage.

Review in The Georgia Straight, Vancouver, BC

Perhaps it’s fitting that a film about death and the dying should close the DOXA festival. One would hope, though, that *Stopping for Death:* *The Nurses of Wells House Hospice* didn’t end up at the end of the schedule because programmers thought it too much of a downer with which to kick things off.

Because, perhaps surprisingly, it’s not the buzz kill that most might think a documentary about terminally ill patients and their caregivers might be.

It has its moments, to be sure, and viewers might (and in one or two scenes probably should) find a tear or two welling up unbidden. On the whole, though, director Wendy Roderweiss’s unguarded look at the nurses who care for people about to slip their physical bonds is hopeful, enlightening, empathetic, and even humorous.

Wells House Hospice is a Long Beach, California, facility with 16 beds, faltering government funding, and a nursing staff constantly under strain because of personnel shortages, physical and mental exhaustion, and an environment that has refined uncertainty to an art form.

Roderweiss and her cinematographer, Natasha Bayus, don’t flinch in the face of death and its attendant indignities. There are people dying on-camera, some with acceptance of their fate and others in denial or determined to fight, even with no strength left. It’s hard, if not impossible, to watch and remain unaffected.

Among the caregivers is Curtis, the upbeat health aide who quit managing a fast-food restaurant because the living were too unpredictable and mean-spirited. He absorbs insults with a smile, dresses up as “Mrs. Death” at Halloween, and is one of the few left standing after Roderweiss finished her project.

Plain-speaking newcomer nurse Cindy, who might make people think of Janeane Garofalo in scrubs, addresses funding woes and the resultant mental and physical hardships by turning to the camera, giving her state’s governor the finger, and calling him a “motherfucker”. She has even less kind words for staff at a local county hospital who washed their hands of a hopeless cancer case by performing a tracheotomy, painfully and needlessly prolonging a life that was about to end, and shipping him off to the hospice.

Judith, the charge nurse and a recovered alcoholic who says she gets more out of her job than she gives (“and I like to think I give a lot”) and who describes holding patients’ hands while they take their last breaths as “a very beautiful experience”, finally can’t take the day-to-day pressure anymore. (And as she relates, even a welcome recent raise only elevated her salary to a bit less than that of a bus driver’s.)

There are also nursing director Diana; David, the program director who has the unenviable task of trying to squeeze blood from the stones that are his nursing staff; and the hospice residents themselves, many of whom are indigent, drug addicts, and estranged from family at their time of greatest need.

The Wells House staff become their family. Watch them crowd into the room of Mary, one of their more cantankerous charges, as she moves from “transition” to taking her last laboured breaths. Look at the faces of these professionals as they witness, share, cry, sing, and kiss her goodbye. Others wash her body and fix her hair (“There, now she’s ready”). Note that it is not until the mortuary attendant arrives, closing her eyes and drawing a sheet over her face, that you think of her as a body and not Mary. And become aware of the swelling in your own throat.

Everyone knows, intellectually, that death is inevitable, that it follows life as surely as night follows day. Few people, however, in our society deal with the subject with as much good grace, compassion, and even humour as these angels.

That few of them--despite their stalwart souls and fierce love of what they do--survive the rigours of their chosen calling is the real tragedy.

From Salt Spring Film Festival:

Most of us in North America hide from death. But the nurses at Wells House Hospice live with it daily. This is not a downer film. This is an inspiring (and even funny) look at the everyday gallantry of dying people and the nurses who make sure they live life right to the end. It is honest about the toll this takes on the nurses, and about the contributions some of these people have made to their own demise. It isn’t all flowers and serenity, but it is a true look at one of many days of love and caring. It will fill you with pride in human beings, and though you may cry a little, you will also smile.

Festivals and Screenings:

2013 Doxa Documentary Festival, Vancouver BC Canada

2013 Athens International Film and Video Festival, Athens Ohio

2013 Newburyport Documentary Festival, Newburyport MA

2013 Food for Thought documentary screening series, The Linda WAMC’s Performing Arts Studio, Albany NY

2013 Salt Spring Documentary Festival, Salt Spring BC Canada

2013 Image Sante Festival, Belgium

Links:

Trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/57994251>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stopping-For-Death-The-Nurses-of-Wells-House-Hospice/329104397212334?ref=hl>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/Stopping4Death

Credits:

Director: Wendy Roderweiss

Producers: Natasha Bayus and Wendy Roderweiss

Cinematography: Natasha Bayus

Written by: Wendy Roderweiss

Post Sound: Kirk Wheeler

Score: Joel Martin

Cast:

Diana Hershey

Curtis Bos

Cindy Copland

Judith Loniak