

# Secrets of Life and Death

*Films about Death and Transformation*

MEDIA CONTACT: Michelle Peticolas  
CONTACT PH: 510/526-9525  
EMAIL: [onthedgeprod@earthlink.net](mailto:onthedgeprod@earthlink.net)  
[www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com](http://www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com)

## *Facing Death...with open eyes*

“Two weeks before she died, I asked my mother what it was like to be facing death. She couldn’t answer.” recounts local filmmaker Dr. Michelle Peticolas in her new film *Facing Death ...with open eyes*. This half-hour film is the first in a new four-part documentary series: *Secrets Of Life And Death*. Débuting at **Oakland’s Chapel of the Chimes on October 18, 2007, at 7:30 pm**, the film will kick off their annual Day of the Dead activities. The film screening will take place in the Julia Morgan Chapel at **4499 Piedmont Avenue, Oakland, CA 94611**. A discussion will follow the film.

“[This is] one of those rare documentaries that truly uses the medium of film to contain a message that communicates, not only to our minds, but even more to the heart and soul of us, an eternal verity about the world,” says Berkeley author Carolyn North, who wrote *THE EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME: Living Fully, Dying Consciously*. “Death is not an easy subject to talk about in a way that does not strike fear and dread, but this film does it... This is a transformational, aesthetic and wise work for every one of us who is now alive, and who will one day make the journey through and beyond death.”

In the film, Dr. Peticolas turns the camera on herself and four remarkable other Bay Area people to uncover profound truths about life and death. Robin, newly divorced, ready to set her San Francisco world on fire in her forties, is struck out-of-the-blue by a rare disease. She nearly dies and the illness can kill her at any time. Tighe, young, beautiful and living in the Castro, tests positive for the Virus. He tries the new drugs, the new therapies, all the new Yoga positions, but after eight years, he’s had enough. Rick, noted author for his books on Zen Buddhism and editor of the San Francisco publication *Yoga Journal*, is diagnosed with lung cancer; he loses his freedom, his health, his looks, and his work. Where does that leave his beliefs? Local and national public speaker, author of *Be Here Now*, and modern pioneer of conscious dying, Ram Dass is put to the test when a stroke damages the speech center of his brain and leaves him partially paralyzed.

Their four stories are woven together in an elaborate mosaic of words, images and music, evoking loss, confusion, anger, and despair, and at last, discovery. Ram Dass desperately reaches out to his dead teacher, saying “Graceful, life is graceful! So, what about the stroke?” An answer comes back to him: “Stroke is grace.” All four must make a perceptual shift to find their own answer to this conundrum, to find the grace, the gifts of death.

Dr. Michelle Peticolas has been working on this film series since 1999. She leads a bereavement support group at Sutter VNA & Hospice in Emeryville and teaches classes on death and end-of-life at JFK University in Pleasant Hill. By day she works as a legal secretary manager and trainer at the San Francisco law firm, Jackson & Wallace, LLP.

Chapel of the Chimes crematory and columbarium was founded in 1909. Many architects have contributed to the Oakland landmark building; primarily Julia Morgan and Aaron Green. Chapel

# Secrets of Life and Death

*Films about Death and Transformation*

MEDIA CONTACT: Michelle Peticolas  
CONTACT PH: 510/526-9525  
EMAIL: [onthedgeprod@earthlink.net](mailto:onthedgeprod@earthlink.net)  
[www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com](http://www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com)

of the Chimes Oakland is a member of the Lifemark Group, which provides end-of-life services throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Allison Rodman of Lifemark is coordinating the event, 510-228-3207 or [arodman@lifemarkgroup.com](mailto:arodman@lifemarkgroup.com)

“The film is beautiful – gemlike, focused and pure.” [The filmmaker has] captured some of the poignancy and mystery that are in the room whenever a person faces death honestly,” says Senior Medical Director, Brad Stuart, MD of Sutter VNA & Hospice.

# Secrets of Life and Death

*Films about Death and Transformation*

MEDIA CONTACT: Michelle Peticolas  
CONTACT PH: 510/526-9525  
EMAIL: [onthedgeprod@earthlink.net](mailto:onthedgeprod@earthlink.net)  
[www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com](http://www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com)

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I returned to my family home and my dying parents full of glorious notions about the mystery and sacredness of dying. I was met with the blare of a radio, the smell of urine, family bickering and stunning emotional demands. Here I was, face-to-face with the preciousness and impermanence of existence and all I wanted to do was hide. I tried talking to my mother about what she was going through but soon realized she was more interested in finishing up her projects than in sharing any inner journey of the spirit. My father, dying from Alzheimer's, could tell me nothing. I blamed it on American culture and my parents' upbringing and my own lack of experience, and set out to make a film that would change the way people thought about death. I began by seeking people who were open to the more mystical sides of dying. But in the process I came across death in all its aspects, the nitty-gritty of bedpans along with the sublimity of the divine. These two sides of death, the sacred, hand-in-glove with the profane, end up driving my film and me, to places I never foresaw.

As I sought answers to my questions the film evolved into four films. What is it like to face death consciously? How might care giving be a beautiful experience? Are there better ways to acknowledge death and handle grief? And why would anyone chose to work with the dying? These compact films embrace the power of storytelling; not just the enchanting magic of an interesting story well told, but the psychological and social healing that can emerge from hearing and talking about that which is ordinarily secret or denied, the exquisite relief of bringing death to the table. The stories in each film are interwoven in content, imagery and sound, and take the viewer on a journey, not simply as an observer but as an emotional participant. Through their immersion in the experience of the storytellers, people are invited, in fact, excited to share their own stories. And through the ensuing dialogues, one hopes we may all become a little more comfortable, a little more open and maybe a little less afraid the next time death comes to the door.

# Secrets of Life and Death

*Films about Death and Transformation*

MEDIA CONTACT: Michelle Peticolas  
CONTACT PH: 510/526-9525  
EMAIL: [onthedgeprod@earthlink.net](mailto:onthedgeprod@earthlink.net)  
[www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com](http://www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com)

## FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

### Dr. Michelle Peticolas, **Producer/Director**

Michelle is filmmaker with a Ph.D. in Sociology from Indiana University. She worked with an award-winning New York documentary production company, Claypoint Productions, on several films including *The Creative Spark*, one of a four-part series on dreaming for the Discovery Channel and *On the Trail of Dracula* for National Geographic Explorer. In New York City and later in San Francisco, she produced and hosted a popular half-hour cable series, *On the Edge*, exploring the mind, body, spirit connection. Since 1984, she has been studying with a Sufi master from Baghdad, and for ten years served as his media director. She currently teaches seminars on death and end-of-life at John F. Kennedy University and leads a weekly partner-loss support group for the local chapter of hospice.

### Robert Mohr, **Director of Photography**

Robert began his training at the Famous Photographer School, guided by such notable faculty as Avedon, Beattie, Eisenstadt, Halsman, Penn, and Stern. After a stint as a camera operator at KHET PBS 11 in Honolulu and working with the local commercial photographers, he moved to San Francisco to get into motion pictures. He wears a variety of hats including producer, director, director of photography, lighting director and still photographer. He has worked on projects for Airstream Pictures, Commonwealth Club, Computer History Museum, Contrast Productions, Cornerstone Productions, Directors Guild of America, Fox Pictures' *X-Men 3*, National Television Academy Santa Fe Productions' *They Came to America* (PBS), and Summertime Films' *Her Best Move*.

# Secrets of Life and Death

*Films about Death and Transformation*

MEDIA CONTACT: Michelle Peticolas  
CONTACT PH: 510/526-9525  
EMAIL: [onthedgeprod@earthlink.net](mailto:onthedgeprod@earthlink.net)  
[www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com](http://www.secretsoflifeanddeath.com)

## Elaine G. Trotter, **On Line Editor**

After fifteen year serving as an online editor and instructor for Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco, Elaine started her own company, Invision Production in 1985. She specializes in editing, color correction and DVD authoring and has worked with well-known performing arts and cultural organizations and independent producers throughout the Bay Area. Her credits include: Ballet Afsaneh's performance DVD; *Edison's 100th Birthday* for the Smithsonian Institute; *In the Mind's Eye* for an installation at NY MOMA and other museums; KQED's (PBS station) weekly magazine *Womentime and Company*, a seven-part KQED documentary series with Ram Dass and Steven and Andrea Levine and the award-winning documentary short, *Let's Face It*.

## Elise Lebec, **Composer**

Oakland based singer and songwriter Elise has a special talent for collaboration. Her first album, *Tabith Plays Billich* is a collection of original piano pieces celebrating the paintings of Australian artist Charles Billich. *No Ordinary Day*, a song from her second album, *Back to Innocence* was used in the Hollywood film, "*Americanizing Shelly*." She has composed original music for *Metal* by Adryenn Ashley, *My Mother Said* by Jessica Sisson, *Une Amercaine a Paris*, by Megan Goedewaage, and *Bella Bella* by Liz Sher. Her latest album, *Possible Dreams*, ranked #14 on the New Age Charts for over 8 weeks.