

Anna Byrne Interview

Karen Wyatt: [00:00:00] Welcome to End of Life University on YouTube. Today I'm sharing with you a conversation with Anna Byrne who is the author of the newly released book, *The Last Caravan: The Power of Community at the End of Life*, in which she describes being part of a team that helped a woman use medically assisted dying at the end of her life.

And, I think you'll find it very interesting to hear about this entire journey, so stay tuned for that. Make sure you've subscribed to this channel down below, and also subscribe and leave a rating and review for the podcast wherever you happen to listen. And go to eoluniversity.com/support and you'll find three different ways you can make a small contribution that will help keep this channel and the podcast on the air.

So we'll move on now with my conversation with Anna Byrne.

Today I'm very excited to welcome back my return guest, Anna Byrne. [00:01:00] She was on the show- several years ago now. Time has gone by so quickly. Anna experienced a cancer diagnosis at age 32 that shaped her understanding of dying as a catalyst for human connection and led to over a decade of work as an end of life educator, speaker, and author.

Her memoir, which we discussed in our first conversation, *Seven Year Summer*, a finalist in the Whistler Independent Book Awards, is used as a training tool in hospices. Anna holds degrees in gerontology, psychology, education, and theology with a thesis on medical assistance in dying. She delivers keynotes, workshops, and training for organizations such as the Canadian Cancer Society, the BC Hospice Palliative Care Association, and Vancouver Island University.

She lives in British Columbia, , on the traditional territory of the Tla'amin Nation, where she coordinates services for a [00:02:00] hospice society and co-founded community supported dying qathet, an initiative to equip communities to care for those who are aging, ill, or grieving. And Anna is also the author of *The Last Caravan: The Power of Community at the End of Life*, which was just published one month ago, and we're gonna be talking all about that today.

And you can learn more at her website, annabyrne.com. So Anna, thank you so much for joining me today.

Anna Byrne: Thank you so much, Karen. It's so nice to speak with you again.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. We were just talking about, like, how much life has happened in the interim since the last time we talked and sometimes I don't look at life that way.

I don't see it until I remember when we touched- base before maybe five years ago or something and-

Anna Byrne: Exactly.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah ... e- every ... It's a whole new world now.

Anna Byrne: That's right. Yeah, it is.

Karen Wyatt: But during that five years you've been on this, r- you've been on an incredible [00:03:00] journey and it probably, you were already doing it at the time we talked before, but, that you wrote about now in this book, *The Last Caravan*, and so I'm really interested in learning a little bit more about that, about the journey itself and the book that you wrote and, anything that you wanna share with us to get started.

Anna Byrne: Yes. This is a, the story of a good friend of mine, Mary Morgan, whom I met back in 2018 when I was facilitating a hospice volunteer training actually, and Mary was taking it as a participant. And the very first thing I remember her saying was, she said this to the room, "I'm here because I'm dying and I, wanna learn all that I can."

And, it, now in hindsight it was such a prophetic statement, that would certainly affect the, the rest of my life. But that's really how I came to know her. it, [00:04:00] but it, at the very end of that training she said, "Why don't we continue learning through a death and dying book club?" And so there was about 10 of us who signed up for, what we called the Death and Dying Book Club, and we started meeting once a month in each other's living rooms, and we talked about all kinds of books.

Kids books, memoirs, near-death experiences, practical guides. And that's really how I came to know Mary. We were very different in many ways. and I think the book club gave us this shared language and trust and comfort level with each other and, around the topic. and so the book really details then what came with her end of life decisions and how I entered back into that several years later.

Karen Wyatt: It's that's so fascinating 'cause I don't very often hear ... I all the times I've been part of or sat in on [00:05:00] workshops and discussions around end of life issues, I don't very often hear someone actually say, "I'm dying, and that's why I'm here. I wanna know about this." It seems like that fits Mary's personality really well, though, that she was an activist always involved in things, and that she just wanted to know as much as she could.

She wanted to be educated and, know about what was happening in her life.

Anna Byrne: I think that's really true of her. She spent her entire life, in fact, working in economic development in post-conflict countries around the world, and education and educating herself was very important.

always, she always had, a curious mind. She loved culture. She loved people. She loved learning, and she felt because of the people she lived with, which included many indigenous groups who took her into their home, that learning should be, heart-based, it should be [00:06:00] experiential, it should be communally developed, and it should be really accessible to everyone.

So that really was a lens that she approached her dying with. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: Which is, just remarkable. think of what a different world it would be if ... it's not that she was without fear around death or dying either- but she just understood that learning more about it is actually the best way to, to approach it. Yeah

approach it. If, if we, if more people would take that attitude and actually educate themselves, it would make a big difference.

Anna Byrne: Yeah. Having a curiosity around these things and just even in the fear, being curious about what that means and the next step, it, really served her, and I think that's ... The story becomes how that can serve all of us really.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, 'cause in her quest to educate herself, she ends up inspiring a book club where everyone there is reading [00:07:00] books and learning more and more together along with her. And then even the group of people who formed around her, including you, to support her at the end of life, I just imagine that was such an incredibly educational experience for all of you to go through that with her.

Anna Byrne: Yes, and how that, what ended up happening is she had already been diagnosed with multiple myeloma, and the treatment hadn't worked. So

she knew that at some point, she was still very healthy when I met her, that, but that at some point that would change. And then in 2019, she had a really bad fall from her bike, and she was bedbound really for a month.

And there was a lot of local friends who gathered around her and helped her through that time. And she ultimately recovered, but, that really left a mark on her, and she, after that, it was, it w- over the [00:08:00] holidays in 2019, between this bike accident and what became COVID-19, she developed this plan around, what she wanted for the end of her life.

And in really early 2020, she approached a small group of friends saying, "I've got this document," which was, her doctors, but also what she wanted done with her body and spiritual care and but it really hinged on having a small group of people to help her to pull it off. And so she approached this group of friends and said, "Will you be my dying team?"

And that's ... She coined, that phrase for us and it stuck. It, was simplistic, but also, it really, I think, showed Mary's engagement with her death, which is like y- "You are my dying team. You are the team of people who are gonna help me to stay at home to, to die."

Karen Wyatt: I just ... I love that. I love the [00:09:00] phrase dying team, and the thought that if we approach death consciously and, we, live with our fear of it, but decide to learn what we need to know, it gives us this opportunity to create a dying team, to know that this is my support team.

These are my people that will be with me and who are on varying parts of this journey with me. And, everyone would like to have that. I feel like everyone would like to have a dying team. So many people don't think about their death or even allow themselves to imagine it until the very, very end and there's no time then to, bring together such a team of people.

Anna Byrne: And then, as you mentioned earlier, I spent seven years in the medical system in my 30s, and I had lots of conversations with different people, and now of course in my hospice work. And I ... it's rare that I've ever met someone who was [00:10:00] as intentional as Mary was about really engaging with her death and really wrestling with the social and emotional aspects of her death.

And I've never met anyone who then saw their own dying process as a way to build community. And that really, in our, early conversations stuck out to me that this was amazing, that she had this lens. And I think because she had lived

in so many chosen families through her life, community was another lens that she just naturally applied to her dying.

It had to be a part of her dying. So we weren't family, and we were just these chosen family, chosen group of friends that said, "Yeah, we'll do this with you."

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, and she was like, like the magnet in the center that attracted the dying team around her, to [00:11:00] orbit around her to help her.

But, I'm comparing that with so many people, their dying team ends up being maybe a hosp- staff members at the hospital who are not consistently there and who don't even know the person, who haven't been part of the rest of the journey. Or even a hospice team, which we like to think of in hospice- we like to think of that team as being a good dying team, but most people don't even enter hospice until the very end. So there's, again, they're lacking that, a shared history together and a chance to really become part of the journey.

Anna Byrne: Yeah. And I think what we found is if you can at least have one person who will advocate for you and will, knows your wishes and can orchestrate to some degree, we all then will have a better chance of getting what we really want at the end of life if we have that at least one dedicated person, ideally more, [00:12:00] to do, that with us.

Karen Wyatt: And it, it seems like Mary was pretty clear that she didn't really want a medicalized d- death. She didn't want to die in a hospital, which most people agree, most people do not want that.

Anna Byrne: Yes. She had a few years before, a four-year bout with very serious insomnia and, it, it really left her with some medical trauma, and she just could not face going into the hospital.

and then of course when COVID started, shortly after we started meeting, that was ... She just absolutely not, because she knew that she would be alone. because at that point people weren't allowed, if you were cognitively aware, you were not allowed to have an advocate with you. um, that was ... That became a real, something that we really had to consider because with multiple myeloma she was at a great risk of breaking bones.

So how were we gonna do [00:13:00] this plan where she would be able to stay at home? What were the things that we were gonna need to make sure that could happen?

Karen Wyatt: Really a major complication at that time. Yeah. which we ... all remember that for people that we know and love who, some who did die alone in the hospital, some who, Yeah

died at home but probably didn't have access to the care they may have needed.

Anna Byrne: Yeah. it's ... I think we've learned a lot through that process about how necessary it is to have this social, emotional, spiritual care. That is as important at the end of life as the practical and medical care.

Karen Wyatt: And you wrote about in the book the, ring theory of support, which I just wanted to mention just because it's such a good concept for people to keep in mind.

So for anyone who's looking to how, do I create my dying team, I think the ring theory could be really helpful if you'd explain that. [00:14:00]

Anna Byrne: And I, wish I came up with this, but I didn't, but it was a psychologist that came up with this. yeah, please look it up. It's such a great theory. And the idea is that there's rings of care.

So in our case, Mary was at the center of our, that circle, and then the dying team was the next immediate circle. And, that was to infer not e- not even our, relational closeness to her, but just our practical one. And then her medical team and her local friends were the next circle, and then her friends all over the world, which she had many dozens of friends who were supporting her from afar.

but o- one of the key things for us was the idea is that, comfort always moves in towards the middle of the circle- And dumping or, stress moves outwards. that's because the inner [00:15:00] circles h- are under more pressure and under more stress. So Mary got all the love and care from all the other circles, but those circles went to the other, the outer circles in...

if they were feeling stressed. So we didn't go to Mary for our own stressors. We went to her friends, our friends, our family.

and that just added another layer of support for everybody. Everybody knew who they could go to, and it also protected, those under the greatest stress from more stress.

Karen Wyatt: It's a, such a good concept. And as you said, it's fairly simple to imagine. Yeah. But it makes sense that we need to see multiple rings of support people, because there are people m- more peripheral to us, but who are still willing to do something to s- to support if they know what to do and if we have the means of asking them for some sort of help.

They're not the people who will show up every day and [00:16:00] actually, sit vigil or be there, but they're people who will do things to help. And it takes all of the rings, I imagine, to provide the best care.

Anna Byrne: It does. And, what I see in hospice is the family who's usually around in the closest ring, they are used to doing everything.

And as the stress of the approaching death increases, they continue to try and do everything. where really if there are multiple people who are willing to step in and mow your lawn, walk your dog, provide a meal, and allow you to do the things that only you can do, that you can do best for that person, which is the emotional, spiritual, practical support.

but temporarily you can let go of mowing the lawn and let somebody else who can do that job do it so you can really focus on what the care is [00:17:00] that only you can provide.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. That's such a great reminder for caregivers in general. And people probably have more rings of support than they realize. I know a lot of caregivers who think that they're very much alone in what they're doing, but they probably actually have groups of people around them m- more peripheral to them if they sat down and thought about it, who could do something more to help out.

Anna Byrne: Yeah, it, the fascinating thing to me is when I look back, Mary and I were not actually close friends. We had gone through the Death and Dying Book Club. We were certainly on, friendly terms, but we didn't socialize outside of the book club. But when it came down to it, and, part of that was at the beginning of COVID she asked us...

We were really just c- the coordinators. We were gonna coordinate all these other people who were closer to her to come and help. Some were gonna help in the household, some were gonna do spiritual [00:18:00] support. But because of COVID, it just changed things, and we became this core group, that none of us really intended.

But what I took out of that is we developed that relationship. And I do think that's part of the beauty of chosen families and, broader community is that if you're involved in volunteer organizations or service clubs or churches or we, or neighborhoods, people are willing to say, "I can deliver a meal once a week," or, "I can do whatever."

And we do, I think, have a broader network than we realize. But we, it g- it takes a lot of courage to ask, too.

Karen Wyatt: To ask. Yeah. And I think it's a good reminder for all of us, this concept of community death care. It's a responsibility in some ways for all of us no matter where we live. We have neighbors, we have people- Yeah

around us. W- we have family and friends. [00:19:00] But there will always be a need for some sort of support or help. And if each one of us takes that seriously and says, "How could I help out? What could I offer that might be helpful in this situation?" I think we could make things a lot easier for all of us if, we were community-minded in that way.

Anna Byrne: Yes. L- one of the things I say at the end of the book is, we can't die in community if we don't live in community. But there's very simple ways of fostering this. It doesn't mean that you have to go live with your neighbor for three months, but it might mean you take their dog out for a walk, a couple times a week, which is, might be very manageable for you.

And I think that there are these small ways, but if everybody does something small, it c- it contributes and it adds up.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And it just feels like that's really what we need right now in our society. We're all feeling so fragmented, but also isolated in our own little [00:20:00] worlds in some way. And if we can flip that around and begin to just see, but I'm a part of an entire community, and I'm important here, and there may be something that I could be doing that would be gratifying for me and teach me something, but that would make a big difference to another person.

Anna Byrne: And we all are living in community, whether we realize it or not, whether we're active in that, we are. We just are embedded in community. and I do think that is the antidote to a lot of the challenges that we're facing right now, and a lot of the, desperation that people feel and the hopelessness that people feel is to get better connected.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And so you really answered a call in a way. in the very beginning, you did, probably did not realize what it would- ... what it would become and what it would turn into, and yet you were just there in, in the moment w- as things unfolded. [00:21:00] And, you responded to that call and really showed up for Mary in such a powerful way, but it also seems like a life-changing way for you as well.

Anna Byrne: I think COVID was so unique in that, it really changed the dynamic of our group. We, had to step into this in a more, in a deeper way, in a broader way, and in a more intimate way. And it also created sort of the conditions where we, weren't committed because of COVID. We couldn't do a, lot of other things.

So we had a little bit of extra time to give to her. and I think we were really intentional as a group to, in the three of us, to make sure that we were not gonna burn out, that we were offsetting each other. a lot of Mary's peripheral friends, even though it was COVID, they picked up her mail.

They could come outside and do, chores. Drop off library books was another one. So [00:22:00] people did do these things, and it did help our team, preserve what we were able to do in a, when we think back, it was really actually very manageable for most of the time.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah. And I, I wanted to mention, that you used an online platform.

It's called Lots of Helping Hands, and I did an interview several years ago with them, but there, there are other platforms like it. Meal Train is one, and-

Anna Byrne: Yeah ...

Karen Wyatt: Caring

Anna Byrne: Bridge

Karen Wyatt: But that is one, one thing that enabled you to stay connected to other people, to the other rings, right? Because you could post on there what was needed on certain days.

Is that how it operated for you?

Anna Byrne: Yeah. It, Lots of Helping Hands and other platforms, they're great because they're multifaceted. So the first thing it allowed us to do was there's an a- announcement, a way of we could post what was happening, and it would instantly go out to all of her [00:23:00] friends and family.

So we weren't spending extra time fielding calls, individual emails, that kind of thing. And then the other thing is there's an actual calendar in there where you can put out a request. So Tuesdays Mary needs her library books picked up. And people just go in, and they can look through the tasks, and then they can choose what they have time for, is accessible to them.

And so it, I don't think it was a burden to anybody because people had the opportunity. And I think even people that don't use a platform, I always say just make a list of stuff that somebody else can do, and then pe- because people ask, and people will say, "What can I do?" Because they wanna help and, but they often feel helpless.

and then you can just give them the list and say- Th- this is, if there's anything on this list that you felt that you could contribute to, and then people will choose what they have time for and, the [00:24:00] ability to do, and it's really easy, and people do want to help.

Karen Wyatt: And it seems like the tasks got done.

People showed up. People-

Anna Byrne: Yeah ...

Karen Wyatt: did sign up for things. Yeah. And it's, really amazing, and it takes away that burden of any one person having to make phone calls to try to find someone to do- Yeah ... the tasks. T- everyone gets to volunteer, and they see the spectrum of what's needed and pick what fits their schedule, and how amazing that it worked out.

It just seems like that's essential for this idea of community care, where we're asking lots of people to get involved and do some little thing, but to have this central clearing house where they can find out what's needed and sign up for whatever they can do.

Anna Byrne: Yeah, and it makes it really easy for a caregiver who may be shy or worried about asking.

It's very, it's just there, and people can, volunteer.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, so I really [00:25:00] love that, and I would encourage people to check out these platforms even if you're j- just your own family is providing care for a loved one. Yeah. And even if it isn't everyday constant care, even if it's, we're all looking in on mom every now and then, reminders of the things mom might need, rides sometimes.

Maybe she needs to go on an outing somewhere. Maybe she needs someone to have lunch with some days. just to have these reminders and to help people see how they could fit in and what they could do to help.

Anna Byrne: And I think it's meaningful for everybody. People do genuinely want to contribute.

Karen Wyatt: yeah. In the moment, it's just so hard to know what's needed- It's huge ... or how to contribute if there isn't, a- access for that. so in the... Eventually it turned out that Mary decided that she wanted to use, in Canada it's called medical assistance in dying, and, had she, had [00:26:00] that been a plan from the beginning, or was that something she decided on later?

Anna Byrne: It developed for her. So early on in her diagnosis, she got assessed and approved for MAID. but she always wanted it as, a back pocket option, there in case you needed it. But, it wasn't really until, I would say, four, and maybe not even four months before her death where she really started to consider this, as an, option.

Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: So, she had that benefit of being approved already, and, Canada probably has some different laws than we have here in the US, but that probably was reassuring to her in a way. She knew that she had the option to take a little bit more control over what was happening if needed.

Anna Byrne: Yes, Canada passed their MAID laws in 2016, and I think in the United States, to about 13 [00:27:00] jurisdictions have some version of a, MAID law.

and probably 13 jurisdictions around the world now also do. And I think what I hear from many people is, it's about that choice and about, People are afraid of suffering, I think. And so it's an option that assures them that they won't have to suffer unnecessarily.

Karen Wyatt: And, for your dying team, did everyone feel on board with M-Mary about using it and-

Anna Byrne: that's a great question.

I think in the team, but... And b- more broadly, as we were communicating with her friends and family, I was the person... We all had our individual tasks, and I helped Mary with her communication. So through Lots of Helping Hands. She did those emails for a long time, and then I took over at some point.

So we would receive emails back from her loved ones, and I would say across [00:28:00] the board there was a spectrum of feeling about this. People who felt it was her choice, but still s- in them didn't want her to die prematurely or, a real spectrum. And I think what united us was our love for Mary, and that despite however any of us felt about it, we understood her choice, and we were there to support her.

And, just like we would if she was dying a different death, with different choices, and allowing her ch- different choices than we would make and, just feeling that our love for her was what took care of all the details.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And I was interested, first of all you mention using rituals a few places in the book.

And I guess w- it was when your, when the original team, when you signed on to work with Mary, you did a ritual called the blessing way, which I [00:29:00] just loved, and I was hoping you would describe that for everyone. Because I think it is so powerful that we learn how to incorporate rituals at these threshold times in life.

I think it can make such a difference for all of us.

Anna Byrne: I think ritual and ceremony w- held our team through the whole process, and I feel that we just wouldn't have come through it with as much intention or integrity if we didn't have that as a tool and as a basis for everything that we did, because it helped us along the way I think to process what we were going through, to grieve together, to make sense, to make meaning, and to have something...

rituals allow... They're like a symbol the, of- a deeper transformation that's happening. And sometimes words, [00:30:00] rituals take us beyond where words can go. And they held the team in ways that were mysterious and ways

that just were a ground for us beyond the planning and the words. And, and the blessing way was new to me as well.

This was, one of the teammates, Jules, had done this as a parent, and it's a ritual for expectant parents where the community comes around and they have a ceremony, basically committing to support the parents through the pregnancy and postpartum. and f- in our case, we had a fire. Fire was really important to Mary.

She had been around many bonfires throughout her life. So we had a bonfire in Jules' yard. And Jules started, and they just had a ball of, yarn. And the intention was just for each of us to share how [00:31:00] the process was affecting us and, what we hoped for the process, how we were committing to Mary. It was...

it felt like a commitment ceremony really to Mary and to each other. And, m- and so the ball gets passed. Each person that speaks wraps a, a, thread around their, wrist and pass it to the next person. So at the end, we were joined, by the yarn, and then we cut them into bracelets, and we wore the bracelets until, the day of Mary's death when they were rejoined.

But it was really, we all, I think we all look back on that as, a real pivotal point in our, friendship.

Karen Wyatt: It's just so powerful. such, first of all, such a commitment to make. But I love this idea of we will be with you on this journey through this process. I am committed to being here and to helping with whatever you need, and then having that [00:32:00] tangible reminder on your wrist.

That's just really beautiful and really powerful.

Anna Byrne: I remember one thing that came up in that conversation was, this i- was fairly early on, and somebody said, how are we gonna deal with the messiness? 'Cause there's probably gonna be some messiness. It's not all gonna go according to plan.

And it did go messy a, couple of times, and I think that, the other team member, Laurie, she often says, "We had good bones." we could deal with that messiness because we had good bones. We did the work early on to have this foundation for ourselves, and I think the blessing way was a big part of that.

Karen Wyatt: Wow, I love that. That- Yeah ... that phrase to having good bones-

that can support you and get you through- Yeah ... the messiness. Because if anything, death is messy.

Anna Byrne: Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: [00:33:00] And it, always is, and we have to prepare ourselves for that. Like there, we need- Yeah ... ways of getting through the messiness together- without, falling apart.

Anna Byrne: A- and that's not a deviation from the path, that is the path. that this is humanity and our life. it, it is messy, it is hard, there is suffering, and ... But we can meet it together, I think was what we took away from that.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, Oh, that's such a good reminder.

I was even thinking of how many families undertake hospice with a loved one to provide care at home, expecting that somehow it's going to be beautiful- it's, going to be full of love and peace, and it is, but they are not prepared for how messy all of it is at the same time, and how challenging and how much emotion will come up, and conflict, and all of, the really difficult parts.

And I wish [00:34:00] we did a better job of preparing people for the complete picture of what it might be like.

Anna Byrne: Yeah, I, think that's exactly right. We don't have a great picture in society about what a natural expected death is. And it is messy, and it's beautiful, and it's hard, and there's suffering, and there's joy, and all the rest, because it's a h- fundamental human experience.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. and one thing I was interested in, Mary's choice to use medical assistance in dying meant there was a date on the calendar, when y- you all knew, this will be the, day. And then that creates this effect of counting down the days as you get closer and closer, which even, those of us who take care of a loved one at the end of life, we don't

We know that death is coming soon. We don't, aren't sure exactly how soon or when. So it's unique [00:35:00] to actually see it on the calendar and actually have a count of how many days are left.

Anna Byrne: Yeah, it was so interesting to watch that unfold in Mary. And I think when Mary set the date, there was like this simultaneous relief and also this new l- layer of grief that came of just literally subtracting from her life day

by day, and knowing that, there was a s- I think a, psychological and spiritual toll to that in some way of counting down.

Even though it also provided some relief to her to know that day was coming. again, it's complex, it's fascinating. And for us too, it... we knew we were going to be with Mary until she died, however that happened. But, it did snap it into clarity in a [00:36:00] different way.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. it's interesting that you went from being more of an acquai- acquaintance, but I guess, but a friend but not your closest, deepest friend, to having this most intimate- Yeah ... incredible experience with her. And that the clo- the shorter the days grew and the closer it became, like the more important in a way she became in your life, and the more connected you felt.

So I can imagine the anticipatory grief was actually growing during that time, because the, more time you were spending with her before she died, the more you were recognizing what a loss it would be- when she did die.

Anna Byrne: Yeah, I would say in the last couple of months when we knew that date was coming, there was this, additional energy to what we were doing.

and maybe that it would have happened as she [00:37:00] declined anyway. But certainly there was, like, yeah, that added intensity of what we were doing, the closeness. We knew, okay, this isn't gonna be forever, so we can give it more time. And also as a team, As Mary declined, our team also got a, a core power to us, or, yeah, just an energy to our team as we, yeah, endeavored to let her go, which was so fascinating that we, we also got closer because we were losing her.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah. And it's r- it's really fascinating. And y- and as her dying team, not only were you help assisting her on this journey toward her death, but you helped with planning her f- her funeral and her burial. And [00:38:00] I was wondering if you would talk about that and the choices that she made and ...

Anna Byrne: Yeah. Mary was a real visionary.

And so I think she fairly early on had this of "I'm gonna use my death as a social experiment and a model for other people, and let's just see what, happens." And when we think about the spectrum of choices for end of life, she

chose some that interestingly seem very non-traditional, and actually are very traditional, if we just go back a few generations to how we cared for people at home, and, hand-built caskets and in the family plot.

it's very, similar, but it's also, new, I think, in our, in this generation to get our minds around going back to community death care. So as we talked with Mary, she ... We decided that we were gonna [00:39:00] actually build her casket for her, and with her. And so it, COVID, the restrictions lifted one weekend so that we could actually gather outside, so her local friends came and helped to sand and oil and decorate, her casket with this beautiful, tree design.

And Mary herself came and put her own hand to making that casket. and then the casket was brought to her home, before her death. And then we had a home vigil actually for her, after she died so that, again, her local friends could come and spend a few minutes outside with her body to say goodbye.

'Cause it, again, it was su- such a strange thing in COVID having so many close friends, but yet you can't be together. And so this was a safe way for people- I think when you see someone that you love, their, actual body that has died, it does help you understand on a different [00:40:00] bodily level that person is gone.

There's something about ... I think that's why we've always gathered together after someone's died, is to help us really understand that, that person is gone, to share stories and memories, to grieve together. So we wanted to give people that opportunity. And then Mary wanted a green burial, so we ended up transporting, her body in the casket to the cemetery, and participating in her burial.

So- that, really amazing.

Karen Wyatt: Wow. Wow. The full spectrum in this entire experience. I, thought about how you said Mary wanted her dying to be a social experiment in a way- ... and how she was really like being the guide and the teacher all the way through. And in a way, your book, *The Last Caravan*, was the final act because to truly be, be- Yeah

a teacher, it needs to be a book that other people can read and learn from and be inspired by, [00:41:00] and you did that very hard work of committing this entire story to, to the, book itself, and I'm so grateful that you did that.

Anna Byrne: Yeah. Thank you. I, hope, that people take from it that there

It doesn't mean that they have to choose everything that Mary chose, but that there's options beyond what we know of, that are, very affordable, very personal, and can f- we can find these even small ways of inviting people into the process in ways that feel good for us.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

And this idea of being conscious about death and what we want for our dying process, for after death, making choices, talking about them with other people, creating a dying team. it's, really remarkable in a sense that this all happened, especially during the time of COVID. [00:42:00] And, I'm just, curious to know for you and the other members of the team, have you stayed close and stayed in touch?

Do you still feel like you're a, little nucleus of, a team together?

Anna Byrne: Yeah. We were just together two days ago. So yes. It's interesting, we, I think i- in, for Mary's death, so there was the three of us, myself, Jules, and Laurie. And, and then the day of her death, COVID opened up, like the, requirements eased and- There was actually, she invited three other people to come to that, to her, the day of her death.

And one of the team members, Kelly, she says, whatever comes in our lives, we're gonna be bonded. it's just, that's just the reality now." but when after Mary died, Jules and Lori and I got together and talked about how we were going to continue this as part of her legacy. So we have started something called Community Supported Dying [00:43:00] qathet, which offers, events and workshops free of charge in our community to just build local capacity for this idea of how do we equip and educate people and make them feel comfortable that they have the skills to do this.

So we've done everything from movie nights to, we did, we actually built a casket down in a local park where community members could come by all day and just see that in a public space and work on it if they wanted to. And just, yeah, to h- to have that in a, public space actually was really powerful.

and open mic nights. We've done all kinds of things to just how can we find these little entryways for people to start talking a little bit more.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I love that idea. And I, love using the term community supported death care because I think that needs to be the focus for all of us. We [00:44:00] really are

We're not out here trying to be individuals who help with one death. We really need the community focus, and death is the perfect thing to bring us together. Death and grief bring us together more than anything. They cross all lines, all divisions and barriers between us. And so it's really what we need in all of our communities right now.

So everyone who's out there practicing in, whatever it is that you do, whatever field you're in, just change your focus slightly to the community and what can I bring to my community? How can I educate? How can I share? How can I make our community, safer, more loving, more inclusive and caring, and better educated place, for the end of life?

Anna Byrne: Yeah. Our, community, like many I think, are facing shortages in healthcare, homelessness, poverty. There's all these issues [00:45:00] that, Y- the conversation is yes, we need formal structures to be robust, absolutely. And we also need this spectrum of options that, that the best care is actually when people have a spectrum of options to choose from, that they can get some formal care, let's say from the medical system, a- and maybe they want to hire someone privately, and they have friends and family who are willing to step up, and they have broader community who can do a few things too.

And that creates, I think, the strongest net of care- that we can ask for, and that, that is how we need to move of, away from, just one option of like how can the community come together to make, weave this net of support for each other.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, exactly. And I know your book has some resources in it.

[00:46:00] So first of all, it's a memoir, so it tells this amazing story, and the story's so important and powerful 'cause it helps all of us imagine what it would be like, imagine if Mary was part of our lives, what part of the team would we be on, and to even see what is possible and what happened. Partly just Mary's energy in some ways brought all this about.

Yes. But that, that it's possible this, could be done. But then your book also has, resources for people, so talk about that.

Anna Byrne: Yeah, Mary really believed that i- she said like, "I don't need anyone to just replicate what I've done." But she believed that her death could magnify and mirror what was possible, that there's options possible.

And because she was, believed so strongly in shared education, certainly through each chapter, the chapter really, the, book really covers the last 16

months of her life, but each chapter is [00:47:00] also thematic in how, in talking about either rituals or paperwork that's needed or how to talk with doctors.

so it's woven in, and then at the end there's a couple of sections. One is mapping out where death care has come from and gone in the last few years. There's resurgence in interest in death cafes and death doula, and some of the needs around death care. so there's a chapter on that. and then there's also these reflections from the dying team.

So things that we learned that people at all stages, whether you're healthy, aging, or have received a diagnosis, can start really practically doing in their everyday life to build this capacity and this community. And then there's a whole resource section. So everything from, legal and financial terms and documents to, a section for two-spirited and LGBTQ [00:48:00] community, and ar- around assisted dying around the world and disposition options.

So really just wanted to give people resources to then say, "Okay, this was her story. What do I want? What c- what is my next step? What's one step I can take?" towards getting, the aging and illness and dying that I would like.

Karen Wyatt: And I love the idea of the Death and Dying Book Club that you all started really at the beginning of this journey.

That's a fantastic way, to create a small community as a, as a book club, but to read together, to learn and study together. And I just want to say, *The Last Caravan* is a perfect book- ... for a book club to read. It really is. It just opens the door to so many interesting discussions, and even to s- maybe study it over time, not just read it in one month.

Month, exactly. But divide it up and, study it over time because [00:49:00] these are really big questions. We need to spend more time with them and give more thought to them. And so I think, did you mention that you have a discussion guide or a reader's guide for the book?

Anna Byrne: Yes. I... And one of the things I really love to do is meet with small groups of people in book clubs or, they're a service club or a church, because this is where the discussion happens, and that's really the book is about having community conversations and how we can do that.

yes, if people are interested, they can reach out and I'll share that discussion guide, and I'm always happy... I always offer a free Q&A to just meet with

people virtually or however that looks to talk about it or, and answer questions. And I think books are such a, they're gentle, it's non-judgmental, it's- safe. People can enter in, in the way that they want to, but you always learn something from reading a book. [00:50:00]

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, so very true. And should people go to your website i- to get connected with you?

Anna Byrne: Yeah, that's a great way, and they, you can also drop me an email, on the website, and it has all the resources and things there, too.

So that's probably the best.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And it's annambyrne, B-Y-R-N-E, .com is the website, and I will link to that in the show notes. Great. But I would really love to hear, I'd love to hear the feedback after this that, book clubs all around are reading this book together and enjoying the discussions together.

And, even if you have a different type of book club, it doesn't have to be a book club that only focuses on death and dying, but because it's something that affects every single one of us, we all need to be willing to take a look at the topic.

Anna Byrne: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I have friends now that are, like, starting to age, and I think that's a great topic to talk about, what is that [00:51:00] as you enter any different phase of your life, is to just come together and talk about- What other people are going through and experiencing

Karen Wyatt: Yeah.

and in the book you talk a bit about Mary, as she's, losing physical abilities and coping with that constant, steady loss of one thing after another as we get close to dying. and another thing that really touched me is how she really wanted to reconcile some of her relationships that earlier in her life, may not have gone so well.

Yes. And, and in a way th- the struggle to try to do it and to not always be successful in that attempt, I think that was a, a really ... Those were really good stories as well.

Anna Byrne: Yeah. And again, that's part of being human is Mary had a deep desire to, work on all of the relationships that [00:52:00] she had felt had been torn in some way.

and yet, y- to do that at the end of your life is hard when your physical and mental capacity is l- is lower. And to ... You hear sometimes people saying, I'm just gonna..." Kind of the deathbed reconciliation, which can happen. But also it's a lot of expectation to put on someone who is, energetically they don't have the energy to do that.

And she really did her best. And I, I think death, I think wherever Mary is now she would only have the best of intentions for all of the people that were in her life. And I, I, hope that's true of all of us, that death softens all of those hardships that we've encountered personally through our life.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And, I'm curious for you, Anna, after your experience with Mary and writing the book, [00:53:00] have ... Are there things you've learned or things that have changed in your life for you as a result of that?

Anna Byrne: Yes. I think when I was going through my own cancer, I had a, I have a big family, I had lots of friends.

But I didn't consciously think about this idea of community. And, in some ways, there's times during an illness you feel like that's private or it's hard to share. And I think that's one of the biggest things I've taken is, there's such value in sharing during our most vulnerable times.

And it, it's helpful for the person who's dying or ill, and it's helpful for everybody around them. 'Cause ev- everyone who helps us is ultimately gonna go through the same thing. And so we are ... Like, the idea of, Mary had this idea that h- her death could be generative. It could be [00:54:00] life-giving in some way.

And that fascinates me, and that is a question that I will sit with the rest of my life, is how can my dying be generative for others?

Karen Wyatt: Wow. Wow, I love that. That's a ... that's actually a really fantastic note to end this conversation on, because that is a takeaway message. the, it's powerful for all of us to think of and even to reimagine death as a generative experience for other people.

It's not just, a loss. It's not just a waste that, oh gosh, this happens and everything is lost. No. This, it can be generative. It can make a difference, to other people as well. That's real- really powerful.

Anna Byrne: Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: oh, Anna, it's been such a pleasure to talk with you again today. I'm so glad we got to connect.

Anna Byrne: Me too. Thank you so much. It's been so rich and so good to share with you.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, definitely. I will [00:55:00] encourage everyone to get the book, *The Last Caravan: The Power of Community at the End of Life*, and go to annambyrne.com and, get in touch with Anna and get the reader's guide there. thanks again, and take care.

Anna Byrne: You too, Karen. Thanks so much.