

# Laura's Choice Impact Report

*'My mother Laura chose a peaceful death  
with her family beside her. She also chose to  
make a film about it — to get people talking...'*

Cathy Henkel - Laura's Daughter



**Virgo Productions**



# LAURA'S CHOICE

THREE GENERATIONS OF WOMEN COME TO TERMS WITH  
A **RADICAL** APPROACH TO DYING.

A film by **Sam Lara** and **Cathy Henkel**.

**SCREENWORKS** Presents

A special screening of **Laura's Choice**

**SUN 7th Feb // 4.30pm // Ballina Fair Cinemas**  
followed by a **Q&A with the filmmakers**

Tickets are limited [lauras-choice-ballina.eventbrite.com](https://lauras-choice-ballina.eventbrite.com)



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Australian  
Broadcasting  
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# Summary

Laura's Choice is a feature documentary and two-part series that explores complex questions as three generations of women travel into uncharted territory and navigate a radical, dignified and highly controversial approach to dying. The documentary is accompanied by a website, online community forum and social media spaces to engage with audiences and encourage conversation about death, dying and end of life choices.

## Short synopsis of the film

Laura Henkel is eccentric, outspoken, feisty and 90 years old. She decides she wants to end her life in her own way, with dignity. She does not have a terminal illness; she just wants to be in control of the process and be allowed to go with dignity. She asks her daughter Cathy and granddaughter Sam, both filmmakers, to make a film about it.

As they struggle to come to terms with her choice, and discover conflicting views in the wider community, Laura applies to a clinic in Switzerland where her right to end her own life, with her family by her side, is legal. She also questions why this major event in life needs to be sombre and sad and plans a joyous farewell party.

Laura's Choice explores complex and often taboo questions as three generations of women travel into uncharted territory and navigate the legal, moral, ethical, and emotional issues that arise from Laura's wish to end her life on her own terms.



*'Laura might have chosen to end her life "in the most wonderful, peaceful way" - with Mozart, champagne and words of love – but she went out in a blaze of glory: a public and controversial death, with her voice still resonating in the powerful two-part documentary she left behind, Laura's Choice.'*

**Susan Chenery - The Guardian**



# Synopsis

At age 86, Laura Henkel decides to take a river cruise in Europe with her granddaughter Sam to fulfil a childhood dream of visiting Vienna. However, after a harrowing fall followed by a life-threatening case of pneumonia, she returns to Australia with a transformed view of her future. She tells her daughter Cathy that she wishes to end her life on her own terms. She's ready to die.

Laura hears about a clinic in Switzerland where her right to die on her own terms is legal. She tells Cathy and Sam that she'd like them to accompany her to the clinic and be there in her final moments. She also asks them, both professional filmmakers, to make a film about her proposed final journey and peaceful death.

Laura has always been somewhat eccentric and a free-thinker, but this request takes them both by surprise and leaves them shocked and confused. Initially they oppose the plan, but soon realise that their only choice is to support Laura or walk away. Sam also has to deal with her feelings of guilt that she is partially responsible for Laura's fall in Europe, which she believes has triggered this decision.



As Cathy and Sam, in their own ways, grapple with understanding Laura's choice, they also uncover a range of conflicting views in the wider community.

After Laura receives approval from the clinic in Switzerland and is given a date for her death, Cathy and Sam realise they have a finite number of days left to spend with her. They plan activities and events to create beautiful memories and meaningful ways to say goodbye. This includes a farewell party themed on The Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Laura is adamant she wants her final days and her death to be filled with 'love, fun and no tears'.

In Switzerland, Cathy and Sam juggle the emotionally charged process of saying goodbye with the logistical needs of filming Laura's last days and moments. Laura does not want any sanitising of the event; she wants the audience to understand what happens, how it happens and why she is choosing this way over all others.

# Why Make A Film?

Initially for Cathy and Sam, the idea of making a film about Laura's choice and her death was a very confronting idea, and they were opposed to it. But seeing how determined Laura was to proceed with her plan, they soon realised their only choice was to support her. So they reluctantly agreed to start filming, initially to appease Laura, but soon discovered there was wide interest in the topic, and a potential audience for this story.

Their first encouragement came from receiving the Brian Beaton Award, given to projects with a strong social impact campaign. They also received support from the state funding agency, Screenwest, and several prizes for their pitch at the Australian International Documentary Conference. The project was then commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) for both a feature documentary and 2 x 1 hour series.



Laura's Choice aired on the ABC as a two-part documentary in March 2021. The impact was immediate and profound. Over 600,000 people watched the story summary trailer the ABC produced, and 365,000 people watched the program. The ABC social media pages and the Laura's Choice facebook page exploded with comments and conversations. Media requests flooded in, and it became evident that Laura's wish to start a conversation was happening.

Laura's Choice won the WA Screen Award for Innovation in a Feature Documentary and the DocEdge New Zealand 'Fearless' Award. It has been nominated for the Screen Producers Award for Feature Documentary Production of the Year, and the ADG Award for Best Direction in a Documentary Series.

'Chronicling the final stage of a person's life, this documentary becomes very relevant to our thinking around VAD and, indeed, how families approach conversations with loved ones who are entering their twilight years.'

Ben O'Shea - The West Australian



# Co-Directors' Statement

When we turned the cameras on ourselves for the first time in 2016 we, like many documentary filmmakers before us, had no idea what the project was to become. What started as a personal project became a much larger story, one which we are proud and honoured to share. It is not just the story of Laura's decision and final journey, but also our own conflicted and emotional struggles as we attempt to come to terms with this and support her to the end.

Charting the emotional journey of all three characters gives the film an authenticity and immediacy that can't be faked. There is a sense of "I can't believe they filmed that" that lasts the duration of the film. By inviting the audience into our living rooms as we navigate genuine, unbarred emotion, it remains both existential and authentic, reminding the audience at every stage that this could be your grandma, your family, your story



While there has been some coverage of physician assisted suicide over the years, Laura's story is different. She was still relatively mobile, still fully aware, and wasn't suffering from a painful or terminal illness. This raises a host of extra questions and ethical issues and puts her on the pointy end of an already pointy debate.

Euthanasia to relieve existing pain and suffering is one thing, but to apply it to a relatively healthy 90 year old who wants to exit with dignity while she still can, is something else entirely. It may be those unorthodox, unlegislated and undiscussed elements which will provoke the most comment.

**Cathy Henkel and Sam Lara - co-directors**

'Personal filmmaking, the act of turning the camera around on oneself and one's family to document that most intimate of interactions, has a strong new entry into an inherently fearless genre with the new two-part ABC documentary presentation Laura's Choice.'

Eddie Cockrell - The Australian

## Audience Response - Statistics

Laura's Choice was first broadcast on ABCTV Plus on the 17th and 24th March as a two-part series. The series was simultaneously launched on the ABC streaming platform iview, where it remains available to online Australian audiences. The series was subsequently aired on ABCTV on 20th and 27th April.

ABC has reported an audience of 365,000 households watched the full-length documentary series on either ABCTV or ABCTV Plus.

ABC iView has recorded 34,000 Views per Minute to date with close to 100,000 Plays. Views Per Minute captures viewers who watched the program for a minute or more. ABC iView also streams eight short clips including additional interviews and support material not included in the full program. <https://iView.abc.net.au/show/laura-s-choice>



## Social Media - Statistics

The film reached the public via a number of social media platforms with the following statistics.

- |                                  |                   |   |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| • ABC iview Laura's Choice clip  | 1.3 million views | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=242204567561137">https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=242204567561137</a>   |
| • SBS 'My Story, Sam Lara' clip  | 712,000 views     | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IOS_GK0T-GK1C&amp;v=1945250765652666">https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-IOS_GK0T-GK1C&amp;v=1945250765652666</a> |
| • ABC Broadcast promo            | 40,000 views      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=737176260327057">https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=737176260327057</a>   |
| • Laura's Choice trailer         | 17,000 views      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lauraschoicefilm/">https://www.facebook.com/lauraschoicefilm/</a>   |
| • Cathy & Sam on Laura's journey | 7,150 views       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVRA2_gjvUQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVRA2_gjvUQ</a>   |
| • Laura's Choice Instagram page  | 4,480 likes       | <a href="https://www.instagram.com/lauraschoicefilm/">https://www.instagram.com/lauraschoicefilm/</a>   |
| and counting....                 |                   |   |

# Audience Responses - in their own words

Laura's Choice had a profound effect on many of its viewers. It attracted comments across a wide range of demographics. A sample snapshot is featured below.



My 13-year-old daughter and I have watched the entire doco. I bawled my eyes out and it has opened up the most incredible dialogue with my daughter. *Bronnie Hayes*

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It is a subject not often spoken of, let alone watched on our television. This was a story that absolutely needed to be spread wide and far. *Wendy Florence Rae*

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As much as this show was about Laura it is much more than that. So much more! She is setting an example of the choices that ought to be allowed in this country. It is as simple as that. *Jeff Isles*

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What a courageous and stunning documentary film. This film is a game changer. Congratulations to Cathy Henkel and Lara. So brave and so beautiful. *Annette Cohen*



Your story made me question so many different things. My own relationship with my mother, and the kind of relationship I want with my daughters. Your story was about volunteer euthanasia but it's brought me so much more. *Monica Galea*

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Coming from a bloke! I can say Laura's story was sad, moving and inspirational! Laura was a truly brave soul and you all need commending on her voice! *Dominik Stevenson*

Thank you, thank you, thank you. That a wonderful, heart-wrenching, inspirational, moving journey you have shared. Films like this do make a difference - they are influential. Sending Love. *Jon Rose*

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Such an important conversation - we focus heavily on birth with plans, check-ups, chosen locations, who will be present etc but don't do the same for death. *Aislinn Martin*





# Media Coverage and Review



Laura's Choice was named in The Guardian's top 10 Best TV Shows of 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/dec/31/from-the-newsreader-to-wakefield-the-10-best-australian-tv-shows-of-2021>

Laura's Choice entered the media spotlight well before its launch on ABCTV. Australian TV network SBS included Cathy and Sam in a VAD debate on its popular 'Insight' program. SBS also featured Sam Lara in a short clip to its 1.5 million followers.

In the lead-up to the ABCTV broadcast of Laura's Choice, the filmmakers were interviewed across a variety of platforms. This included feature interviews in podcasts, radio interviews, print and social media, TV news and current affairs programs, magazines and forums across Australia. Media coverage includes:

- The Australian
- The Guardian
- The West Australian
- IF Magazine
- TV Week
- TV Studio 10 interview
- ABC Radio Perth
- Radio National: Life Matters
- SBS TV 'Insight' current affairs program
- Multiple regional radio programs, newspapers and podcasts



Laura's Choice was broadcast at an opportune time as VAD legislation was being hotly debated by various Australian state governments. The media focus on the documentary filtered into and is likely to have influenced political debate. To date, every Australian state has either implemented, passed, or is considering VAD legislation.

Laura's Choice was named in the NME\* list - 'The 10 best Australian film and TV shows of 2021.'

[https://www.nme.com/en\\_au/features/film-features/best-australian-films-and-tv-shows-2021-so-far-2971717](https://www.nme.com/en_au/features/film-features/best-australian-films-and-tv-shows-2021-so-far-2971717)

\* New Musical Express (NME) British music, film and culture website

'Laura's Choice reminds us of the importance of personal narratives: how social and political issues should be framed less as concepts to debate, but rather as matters that profoundly impact real people.'

Luke Buckmaster - New Music Express

# Laura's Kitchen Table

During the interviews for the film, one of the interviewees remarked that '*Changing society begins with conversations around the kitchen table.*' Taking this idea to heart, Cathy and Sam decided to create a safe space to discuss end-of-life issues, calling it Laura's Kitchen Table.

<https://lauraskitchentable.circle.so/c/welcome>

Laura's Kitchen Table is designed for people who are interested in exploring their own end-of-life choices, as well as a place for families, friends and communities to understand these choices and plan accordingly. It is a place to learn, a place to share stories and an opportunity to engage with others in a spirit of empathy, compassion, respect and understanding.

In March 2021, this concept was also created as a physical space in an Exhibition called Laura's Kitchen Table at Spectrum Gallery at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia.

The exhibition ran for two weeks and attracted hundreds of visitors who came and contemplated the wide range of views on death and dying. Strangers sat around the Kitchen Table and used the prompt cards to initiate difficult conversations. Feedback from visitors was overwhelmingly positive and echoed the gratitude on social media for a safe space to have these conversations.

The online space has 150 members and growing.



'A beautiful and confronting film, I cried all the way through. For the way my father died, in hope for a good death for my mother, and in hope that my choice will be respected when it is time for me. '

Steven - Revelation Film Festival audience



# Film Awards

The documentary has attracted numerous industry awards and accolades from peers. These awards include,

- Winner - Brian Beaton Award for social impact projects.
- Winner - Hot Docs prize at Australian International Documentary Conference, Melbourne.
- Winner - DocEdge New Zealand pitching award.
- Winner - WA Screen Culture Awards for Innovation in Feature Documentary Award.
- Winner - DocEdge International Film Festival "Fearless" Award, New Zealand.
- Nominated - Best Direction in a Documentary Series Australian Directors Guild.
- Nominated - Feature Documentary Production of the Year, Screen Producers Award.



# Film Festivals

Laura's Choice has only just begun its festival rollout but has so far been selected in the following festivals,

- DocEdge International Film Festival, New Zealand
- Revelation Film Festival, Perth, Western Australia
- WA Made Film Festival, Perth, Western Australia
- Docs Without Borders Film Festival, Nassau, Delaware
- Luleå International Film Festival, Luleå, Sweden

International distribution for Laura's Choice is being managed by Off the Fence

<https://www.offthefence.com/>



# Education and Community Forums

Laura's Choice is available for education viewing via The Education Shop. This includes a free Study Guide.

[https://theeducationshop.com.au/search.php?search\\_query=Laura%27s+Choice](https://theeducationshop.com.au/search.php?search_query=Laura%27s+Choice)

Cathy and Sam have been invited to speak at several community forums examining the issues of death, dying with dignity and voluntary assisted dying.

These include:

- Ballina, NSW, community screening hosted by Screenworks with Cathy & Sam. Feb 2021
- The Disrupted Festival of Ideas panel with Cathy; State Library of WA, June 2021
- Adelaide Festival of Ideas panel with Sam, July 2021.
- Dying to Know Day forum with Cathy and Sam: Kidogo Arthouse, Fremantle, Aug 2021
- Cygnet, Tasmania screening and discussion of the issues with Cathy, Sept 2021 (attended by Bob Brown and Paul Thomas).



'I think that there is possibly no better film than Laura's Choice to elevate and celebrate right now. I found this film just about one of the best films and one of the most important documentaries I've ever seen.'

Andrew Peirce - Host of The Curb Podcast

# The VAD Survey

A multi-method community survey on voluntary assisted death (VAD) was developed by Dr E. Gringart, MAPS Coordinator, International Psychology Programmes in the School of Arts and Humanities at ECU.

The development of the survey was informed by relevant literature and an in-depth qualitative investigation. Following a pilot study, the final version of the survey includes 31 quantitative items to assess respondents' VAD attitudes and perspectives.

The survey includes two open ended items that invites respondents to provide information not addressed in the survey, and for details of 'other sources' that have informed them about VAD. The survey also includes eight demographic questions such as age, gender, religiosity, and experiences with VAD .

The survey was launched prior to the screening of Laura's Choice. It was also available to people who visited the Conversations around the Kitchen Table exhibition that took place in early 2021.

To date, survey data have been collected from 532 respondents; 54 pilot respondents, 28 who visited the exhibition, and 450 responses via the Qualtrics platform. The survey remains open until March 2022, after which data will be analysed.



'Take tissues! Thank you for this incredible film. I am left with so much to think about and talk about with my family. So moving. I can't imagine the personal resources it took for these women to tell their story.'

Julia - Revelation Film Festival audience

# Filmmakers' Short Biographies

## Associate Professor Cathy Henkel

Cathy has 33 years' experience as a documentary director, producer and writer. Her credits include The Burning Season (ABC, BBC, CBC, PBS, National Geographic, IF Award for Best Documentary, nominated for an Emmy), I told you I was ill: Spike Milligan (ABC, BBC1) and The Man who Stole my Mother's Face (broadcast in 26 countries, IF Award for Best Documentary) The film won the 2004 Tribeca Film Festival Award for Best Feature Documentary.

Cathy has won numerous other awards including SPA Documentary Producer of the Year (2009), the Brian Beaton Award, an ACS Award, an Emmy and numerous ADG and AFI nominations. She produced and directed Rise of the Eco-Warriors and Saving Jojo, an action adventure feature documentary and series set in Borneo, and Show me the Magic, about acclaimed cinematographer Don McAlpine.

Cathy is the Director of the WA Screen Academy at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia and has a PhD from Queensland University of Technology. She is a board member of the Australian International Documentary Conference and served as the WA Chapter Head for the Australian Director's Guild for four years.



## Sam Lara

Sam Lara has been directing music videos, scripted and factual content for the past 10 years. Her directing work has been nominated at; Sydney Film Festival, St Kilda Film Festival, Flickerfest International Film Festival, Cambridge Film Festival, Byron Bay Film Festival, Doc Edge and Melbourne International Film Festival, where she was selected to participate in MIFF's Accelerator Lab.

Sam holds a Bachelor of Film and Television from Bond University and currently serves as the West Australian chapter head of the Australian Director's Guild. Her feature documentary Laura's Choice won the Innovation in Documentary Award at the WA Screen Culture awards in 2020 and aired on the ABC as a two part series in 2021.



# Key Crew and Finance Partners

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Laura's Choice was produced by Virgo Productions and Factor 30 Films

*Producers:* Cathy Henkel, Sam Lara, Melissa Kelly and Ryan Hodgson

*Written and Directed by:* Sam Lara and Cathy Henkel

*Executive Producer:* Chris Haws

*Editor:* Nicholas Dunlop

*Composer:* Nicolette Boaz

*Impact Producer:* Aden Date

*Website Creation/Management:* Stefan Szo

DEVELOPED AND PRODUCED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF SCREENWEST AND  
LOTTERYWEST

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

The Producers acknowledge the support of Screen Australia through the PRODUCER  
EQUITY PROGRAM.

Produced with support from EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

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Impact Report prepared by Stephen Bartley and Cathy Henkel (December 2021)

The Producers acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which this program  
was produced, the Whadjuk boodja from the Noongar Nation



# Links

- Laura's Choice Website & Kitchen Table: <https://lauraschoice.org/>
- Laura's Choice Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/lauraschoicefilm>
- Virgo Productions: <https://virgoproductions.com.au/>
- ABC TV/iView: <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/laura-s-choice>
- Off The Fence: <https://www.offthefence.com/Brand/2774/lauras-choic>
- The Education Shop: [https://theeducationshop.com.au/search.php?search\\_query=Laura%27s+Choice](https://theeducationshop.com.au/search.php?search_query=Laura%27s+Choice)

Whilst filming Laura's Choice, there were many uncanny events, one of which involved swans appearing at key moments, be it Europe's white swans or Australia's black swans. The swan has become the 'totem animal' for Laura's Choice.



## Contact Details

Contact: [contact@lauraschoice.org](mailto:contact@lauraschoice.org)

Website: <https://lauraschoice.org/>

'Laura's choice is a piece bound to provoke powerful emotions, not to mention furious debates. It's a difficult and controversial topic, but thanks to the extraordinary women at the centre it, it turns out to be a warm, big hearted and often funny trip, even as it draws the tears.'

The Green Guide - The Melbourne Age