



ABC TV Plus | iView

Laura's Choice

Screening from Wednesday 17 March, 8.45pm on ABC TV Plus and iView

Laura's Choice

Two-part documentary series by Sam Lara & Cathy Henkel

Screening Wednesday 17 March at 8.45pm and Wednesday 24 March at 9pm on ABC TV Plus and iview

Both episodes will be available to stream on ABC iview following the premiere.


Laura Henkel is eccentric, outspoken, feisty and 90 years old. She has decided she wants to end her life on her own terms, and she asks her daughter Cathy and granddaughter Sam, both filmmakers, to make a film about it. ***Laura's Choice*** explores complex questions as three generations of women navigate a radical approach to dying.

At the sprightly age of 86, Laura Henkel decides to go on a river cruise in Europe with her granddaughter, Sam, and fulfill 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 wants to be in control of the process, to set the time and place, and be allowed to go with dignity. Initially she plans on doing this in her home in Ballina NSW, but after hearing about a clinic in Switzerland where her right to do this with her family by her side is legal, she shifts her focus. She begins the arduous process of applying to the clinic online and tells her daughter and granddaughter she'd like them to go with her and be with her in her final moments. She also asks them, both filmmakers, to make a film about it. She wants to make some noise about the right for elderly people to choose where and when they die.

Both Cathy and Sam are opposed to the plan at first, and reluctant to assist, but soon realise their only choices are to support her or walk away. They realise they have a finite number of days left with her, and plan activities and events to create lasting memories and meaningful ways to say goodbye.

Laura plans a farewell party a few days before her departure for Switzerland. She wants her death to be a 'happy event' and questions why we have to make this major part of life so sombre. She wants a joyful day, like a birth or a wedding. She asks that there be 'love, good memories, but no tears'. The theme she chooses for the party is the Mad Hatters Tea Party. As Cathy and Sam try to understand Laura's choice, and uncover a range of conflicting views on the issue in the wider community, they also have to fulfill her wish of directing a film about it. Accompanying Laura on her journey to Switzerland and her last days and moments will test them as never before.

Laura's Choice will expose and explore 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.



"I feel I have had enough and am quite ready to go. I do not want to wait for some debilitating disease to carry me away - and going into an aged care facility to endure pain and suffering to the bitter end is not a future I choose for myself. My choice allows me to say farewell joyfully and then go to sleep in peaceful surroundings, with my family beside me at the end, while I am still able to say thank you for all they have done for me."

Laura Henkel

The Characters

Laura

90-year-old Laura was eccentric, outspoken, feisty and fiercely determined. She was well-read, worked as a theatre actress in her day, and was not afraid to ruffle feathers. She also decided she wanted to die on her own terms, and she wanted to help her daughter and granddaughter come to understand the many reasons why. And she wanted to start a global conversation about end-of-life choices.

Cathy

Cathy is in her 60's and is Laura's only daughter. She's also a multi-award winning documentary filmmaker. Once she realises she isn't going to be able to change her mother's mind about her death or the film she wants them to make about it, she prepares herself to confront this challenge as the practical, efficient, level-headed mother and daughter she thinks her family needs her to be. But there's no guidebook on how to deal with the emotional impact of helping a parent plan their death.

Sam

Sam is in her mid-20's and in the midst of working out what she believes about life and death. She's followed her mother's footsteps in becoming a filmmaker, she is ruled by her heart, and she feels things deeply. She's naturally warm, easily excited, and has a naive innocence and belief that life is a rollercoaster which is meant to be enjoyed at all times. Being forced to confront her own mortality, accept the shade as well as the light, and become acquainted with death is not an easy journey.



L-R Cathy Henkel, Laura Henkel, and Sam Lara

About the Film

Background and Context

In 2016, 24-year-old Sam Lara agreed to go across the world with her 86-year-old Grandmother on a Eurotrip. A two week guided river cruise, from Amsterdam to Budapest, sounded safe enough. What could possibly go wrong? Sam, a film maker, did what all film makers do – she took her professional camera gear along to record every moment of the trip. The early footage is a predictable mix of the sights and sounds of a once-in-a-lifetime experience, being thoroughly enjoyed by the intrepid duo. Until the fall.

After taking a tumble beside one of Holland's most picturesque windmill landmarks – a tumble which required a brief visit to the local hospital to dress the cuts and scrapes to her forehead – she began to develop that scourge of the elderly – pneumonia. By the time they reached Vienna, her condition had become so grave that Laura needed to be hospitalized again – and any thought of making their scheduled homebound flight the next day was dismissed until she was strong enough to travel. It was not until four weeks later that Laura and Sam were finally able to return to Australia, but by then something fundamental had changed in Laura's demeanor. She had, in her own words, "had the stuffing knocked out of her" and as she settled back into her routine as an elderly lady living on her own in her modest Ballina bungalow, that close encounter with her own mortality began to dominate her thoughts.

Always fiercely independent, the prospect of encroaching infirmity and incapacity haunted her. Any thought of institutionalized life in an old folk's home terrified her and she slowly became aware of the discussions that were occurring in certain corners of the media on the subject of planning a death by suicide. Previously, she had been unaware of the various 'death with dignity' organizations that existed around the world, or the 'physician assisted dying' initiatives that were taking place within her own country. But in 2018, the issue received renewed attention in the world's media when 104-year-old David Goodall, a celebrated scientist from Western Australia, announced that he was planning to travel to Switzerland to avail himself of their physician assisted dying services. Like Laura, he too had suffered a serious fall, but unlike Laura he had been alone in his one room apartment when it happened and was only discovered by his cleaner two days later. Until that fall, he had maintained an active and engaged personal and professional lifestyle, but now the doctors were calling for around the clock care or that he be moved to a nursing home. He would have none of it, famously stating "I'm not ill. I just want to die." And so he did, by his own hand, on May 10th, 2018 at a clinic in Liesthal, Switzerland, officially registered for that specific purpose.

Gradually, Laura came to the conclusion that Dr Goodall's course of action was the one that she also wanted to pursue. At the age of 89, she had lived a full life and now wanted to exit on her own terms peacefully, painlessly and with dignity. Easier said than done.

And this is where Laura's story – like Dr Goodall's - departs from the growing number of others in which a terminally ill patient, often in great pain, has been able to take advantage of local law – where it exists – to request a physician's assistance in hastening their imminent and inevitable death.

Laura was not terminally ill, nor was she suffering from any long-term condition, such as dementia, that might have rendered her incapable of determining her own fate. Nor was the legislation yet in place in her own Australian state to indemnify a doctor, or anyone else, to assist her in

death by suicide. It's still an almost universal requirement, wherever in the world physician assisted dying has been legalized, that the patient must be a resident in the state where the procedure is to be undertaken. And even then, the process is lengthy and involves the professional opinions of a number of specifically qualified doctors – which is as it should be. Greedy relatives should never be able to decide that rich Uncle Alfred's time is up, just because they fancy his inheritance.

Currently, there are only a very few places where last stage terminal illness and residency are not a necessary requirement. And Switzerland is one of them. Although they are strongly resistant to being labelled as a destination for “suicide tourism”, their laws do permit healthy non-residents over the age of 18 to access the services of a small number of strictly controlled clinics where physician assisted dying is available. The bureaucracy is still lengthy, as Laura was to discover, and the medical oversight is still diligently applied, but eventually those who are prepared to undergo the process of submissions and reviews can travel to Switzerland to die. Getting ‘the greenlight’ from the clinic, with a firm date and time for her ‘appointment’, proved to be a turning point for Laura, Cathy and Sam. Now, Laura's long life journey had a clear, definite and known end.

Cathy and Sam were determined to fill Laura's last days and weeks with her favourite activities – theater visits, ballet and musical performances, and a grand farewell party. Initially, not all of Laura's friends and relatives were comfortable with her decision, but eventually they all came to the conclusion that she would not be dissuaded – and perhaps they shouldn't try.

Laura's History with Documentary (The story of *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face*)

In 1988, Laura was attacked and raped in her own home in South Africa, and the perpetrator, whom she had identified from a photograph, was never charged. The dual impact of being denied legal justice and feeling blamed for the attack by her son and neighbours sent Laura into isolation and depression that lasted over 10 years. In 2003, her daughter Cathy offered to return to South Africa to find and confront the perpetrator and get some justice for her. And make a film about it. The resulting documentary, *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face*, helped Laura to step back into society and feel vindicated, heard and acknowledged. The film had a major impact on her life and provoked an important conversation about victim-blaming and rape being a men's issue. The film went on to win multiple international awards and was broadcast in over 26 countries. A women's rape crisis was even named in her honour in Libya. This positive experience of the impact of documentary was the impetus for Laura's request to her daughter and granddaughter to make a film about her end of life choice and journey.

Finding Interview Subjects

Laura wanted the film to be much more than a documentary about her death. She wanted to provoke a global conversation about the way we talk about death and the choices available to the elderly. She wrote a 10 page Manifesto, outlining her reasons for wanting to die in the manner, time and place of her choosing, and why this right should be available to all elderly people. The document was intended to provoke discussion and debate. She challenged her daughter and granddaughter to speak to people from various professions and faiths and ask them to respond to her ideas and statements. They took up this challenge after she died, and met with two doctors, a lawyer, a rabbi, a Buddhist, an Islamic representative, a death and dying counsellor and an Indigenous elder. These interviews offered a range of provocative and sometimes conflicting views on death and dying. The film does not advocate any specific view on the issues, but Laura hoped that it would prompt families to start the conversation around their kitchen tables. There will be different responses to the film and the way we view death depending on family, cultural and religious circumstances, but Laura's intention was to provoke an open, healthy and lively conversation.



Filming in Switzerland

As the Switzerland date approached, Sam and Cathy realised that being able to focus on spending quality time with Laura and not have to be concerned with filming was going to be really important. Sam had become friends with a filmmaker whilst stranded in Vienna during her Eurotrip with Laura, and she reached out to him to ask if he could recommend anyone to take on the mammoth and emotionally challenging task of joining them in Switzerland to record Laura's final days. Cinematographer Patrick Wally was put forward, accompanied by glowing praise. After a number of meetings over video call, he and accomplished sound recordist Steven Heyse agreed to come on board and journey to Switzerland. Patrick and Steven's presence in Basel was one of the greatest blessings. Their professionalism, proficiency and warmth were welcomed by Sam, Cathy and Laura and they became an inextricable part of the experience. They were given instruction by the directors to capture everything, and managed to become completely invisible as they did so. The days were book-ended by briefings each morning in the hotel foyer, and production meetings each night, after which Sam would stay up late to data wrangle the footage. These long days were not easy for anyone, and the pressure of capturing every moment as it happened was high. Steven's diligence and Patrick's intuition and ability to take Sam's daily shot list and produce something even better resulted in scenes that serve as a beautiful tribute to Laura's final week on earth. Nick Dunlop, the editor of *Laura's Choice*, shed tears the first time he watched Patrick's rushes. This project is conceivably the start of many collaborations between director Sam Lara and cinematographer Patrick Wally.

Working with Nick Dunlop (Editor) & Nicolette Boaz (Composer)

Nick Dunlop brought a phenomenal amount of experience to Laura's Choice. Nick is the winner of seven West Australian Screen Awards, and the 2019 Ellie Award for Best Editing Factual Entertainment. He is also Chairperson of the WA Branch of Australian Screen Editors Guild (ASE). Nick has a deep knowledge of story and rhythm and his attention to detail is unparalleled. He fell in love with all 3 characters throughout post-production, and managed to keep the edit room buoyant while dealing with often very heavy material.

Composer Nicolette Boaz was a friend of Laura's. She had the opportunity to sit down with Laura before she left for Switzerland. Laura and Nicolette spoke in length about Laura's absolute love of classical music and her favourite pieces. This was a rare opportunity for a composer to speak directly with the main character of a documentary before they die, and then compose the score with their taste, personality and dreams in mind.

Nicolette's music captures Laura's exuberance, and the complicated depth of Cathy and Sam's emotions. She arranged for two original pieces (Sam and the Swan and The Final Journey) to be recorded by an orchestra in Budapest. The recording was filmed, and the footage of the masked musicians performing her work is breathtaking.

The fact that these pieces were recorded in Budapest is particularly meaningful, as that is where Laura and Sam were meant to finish on their fateful river cruise. They left the cruise early in Vienna and Laura never got to see Budapest. It's a fitting end that although she didn't get to visit the magical city, the music for her film did.

Both Nick and Nicolette brought a depth of expertise and skill, and a balanced connection to the story.

Directors Statement

By Sam Lara & Cathy Henkel

When we turned the camera on ourselves for the first time in 2016, like many documentary filmmakers before us, we had no idea what the film was to become. As filmmakers, it is in our nature to turn a camera towards interesting events. As a daughter and granddaughter of a woman who wishes to die, it is not in our nature to turn a camera towards our own shock, grief, and struggles. Documenting our family through what would ordinarily be an incredibly private time has been testing, confronting and ultimately incredibly cathartic.

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, 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 the uncomfortable, unlegislated, and undiscussed elements of this story which will provoke the most comment.

This film raises questions that will challenge audiences, emotionally and intellectually. Our hope is that we are able to provide a rich and unique perspective for our audience to be able to engage deeply in the difficult and complicated conversations that Laura's story will invariably spark.

In view of the fact that this is a film about death and dying, we felt it very important to set the tone from the start. Largely thanks to Laura's nature, this is not a film shrouded in melancholy. Rather, it is warm, joyous, and oftentimes funny and absurd. Real life is absurd, and unpredictable, and there is magic in the rawness of it. The beauty in documentary, and indeed in this documentary, is the enchanting opportunity to capture that. We hope that the film will encourage audiences to laugh and cry, and perhaps call a parent or grandparent at the end.

Making this film has been a powerful reminder of what's important to us - our relationships. They're the first thing that matters when we're born, and, as we learned, they're the thing that matters at the end. Laura's Choice is joyous, funny, and bold. It has an unfolding narrative, strong characters, is international in scope and touches on universal themes. This is an unflinching, personal deep-dive into a conversation that is very controversial, and very much in the zeitgeist.

We hope we have honoured Laura's dying wish that this film contribute to a global conversation about an issue that affects us all.



"I encourage you to laugh in this film when you want to, cry when you need to, and after the credits roll hug the person, you're with or, if you're able to, call a grandparent."

Sam Lara

Director | Producer | Writer

Sam Lara is an ADG-nominated Australian filmmaker, a graduate of Bond University, and holds film credits as director, writer, editor, and producer. Sam is a third-generation filmmaker and spent her childhood chasing stories with her documentary-making parents, and her adolescence carving her own way on scripted film sets as an assistant director. Filmmaking is in her DNA and she brings enthusiasm, warmth, and a zest for life to her projects and to her sets.

Sam has been directing fiction, music videos 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 and Melbourne International Film Festival, where she was selected to participate in MIFF's 2019 Accelerator Lab.

Sam currently serves as the West Australian Chapter Head of the Australian Director's Guild. Her feature documentary *Laura's Choice*, co-directed with Cathy Henkel, premiered at Revelation Film Festival in 2020 and won the inaugural Innovation in Feature Documentary Award at the WA Screen Culture Awards.

"Going to Switzerland was an incredibly tough experience, but it was something my Grandma wanted. My choice was to either hold her hand through this or walk away. And I think I made the right decision."

Sam Lara



Cathy and Laura Henkel

Cathy Henkel

Director | Producer | Writer

Cathy is the founding director of Virgo Productions and has worked as a documentary producer/director/ writer for the past 30 years. Virgo Productions is an award-winning, boutique screen industries company focused on inspiring, positive, global stories with cross-platform delivery and engaging audiences world-wide.

Cathy's previous 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, RTE), *Walking Through a Minefield* (SBS), *Losing Layla* (ABC, HBO) and *The Man who Stole my Mother's Face* (Tribeca Film Festival Best Feature Documentary 2004, IF Award and broadcast in 26 countries).

Cathy was awarded SPA Documentary Producer of the Year in 2009 and won an ACS Award for *Show me the Magic* about acclaimed cinematographer Don McAlpine. Her feature documentary *Rise of the Eco-Warriors* was re-versioned as a 13 x 26min TV series in conjunction with Singapore-based Silver Media Group.

Cathy's latest film, *Laura's Choice*, co-directed with her daughter Sam Lara, premiered at Revelation Film Festival in December 2020, and won the inaugural Innovation in Feature Documentary Award at the WA Screen Culture Awards and won the inaugural Innovation in Feature Documentary Award at the WA Screen Culture Awards.

Cathy has a PhD from Queensland University of Technology and is the Director of the WA Screen Academy at Edith Cowan University. She was the WA Chapter Head for the Australian Director's Guild from 2015 - 2019 and is a board member of the Australian International Documentary Conference.

"My mother's decision to go to Switzerland to end her life was at first very hard to accept, but with time I came to see it as an act of kindness and a gift. It gave me time to prepare and say goodbye in a meaningful way. I feel very grateful to have been able to farewell a parent in this way."

Cathy Henkel

Ryan Hodgson | Producer

In his more than twenty years in the screen industry Ryan has developed, financed, and produced short, feature film and television drama, documentaries, and multiple award-winning television commercial campaigns. His producing credits include the feature films *I Met A Girl*, *Blame and Justice*, and the documentary *Laura's Choice*.

In a four-year engagement at Screenwest (2012-2016) Ryan managed more than \$20M of production funding in documentary and drama projects with budgets totalling more than \$150M. He also oversaw the management of the agency's production investment, business development and company travel funding programs, and advised the agency's Chief Executive and Board on related policy matters.

From 2008-2011 Ryan was the Western Australian Chapter Head of Screen Producers Australia (SPA). He is currently the Chair of Screen Voice, an industry organisation representing Western Australian based screen producers.

Melissa Kelly | Producer

Melissa is an AACTA Award-winning producer with more than twenty years-experience in the Australian screen industry. She has developed and produced documentaries, short and feature film drama, television commercials and comedy-light entertainment. Melissa's producer credits include the AACTA Award winning TV series *Upright* for Lingo Pictures, Foxtel and Sky UK, the AACTA Award winning feature film *Hounds Of Love* (Venice International Film Festival, Busan, SXSW and Tribeca), *I Met A Girl* starring Brenton Thwaites, Lily Sullivan and Joel Jackson, *BLAME* starring Kestie Morassi, Damian de Montemas and Ash Zukerman (Toronto, Melbourne, Dublin, Chicago), and the ABC iview series *Aussie Rangers* with Lisa Flanagan, Jon Bell, Calen Tassone and Shareena Clanton.

Melissa holds a Bachelor of Arts in Media and Communications from Murdoch University and studied Production Management at AFTRS. She has taught Producing at Notre Dame University, Murdoch University, and the WA Screen Academy. Melissa has been a member of Screen Producers Australia (SPA) since 2004 and was a Film and Television (FTI) Board member from 2014 – 2016.

"Helping a loved one fulfill their wish to voluntarily end their life is no easy thing. Turning the camera on yourself to document the process is a rare kind of bravery. Laura Henkel compelled Cathy and Sam – her daughter and granddaughter, to tell her story. And what they have created is a very personal and powerful film about a remarkable woman. It is a film – just like Laura wanted, that challenges the audience to consider and discuss end of life choices. A topic long overdue for more widespread debate.

Factor 30 Films champions bold, creative storytelling with women in the lead on and off the screen, so we are enormously honoured to have been able to help Cathy and Sam tell Laura's story. A story that sees three generations of women navigate a radical approach to dying. We now hope the documentary helps other families – both here in Australia and overseas, make well considered plans regarding the end of their loved one's lives."

Melissa Kelly & Ryan Hodgson



Laura and sound recordist Steven Heyse

Chris Haws | Executive Producer

Chris has been a prominent figure in the global documentary community for over three decades. As an award-winning writer, director, and producer his programmes have aired on BBC, C4, Sky, PBS, Discovery, National Geographic, Canal Plus, Arte, ZDF, and many other international services and platforms – including ABC Australia.

As an industry leader, he served on the governing councils of IPPA, PACT, the Sheffield Documentary Festival and the World Congress of Science and Factual Producers; he was the Chairman of the European Union Media Documentary Programme where he created the Documentary Forum in collaboration with the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam. He was Discovery Europe's first Commissioning Editor and became Senior Vice President and Executive Producer for Discovery Networks International where he created the award-winning First-Time Film Makers Initiative. As an educator he has taught at universities and film schools around the world and was an Adjunct Associate Professor at the American University School of Communication in Washington DC.

He has advised governments, the World Bank Group, NGO's and multinational corporations on media and communications strategy. And on certain select projects he continues to fulfill a variety of development and production roles, such as Executive Producing *Laura's Choice*.

Nicholas Dunlop | Editor

Nick is a freelance screen editor based in Western Australia. He is winner of seven West Australian Screen Awards including Best Editing and Best Direction, and the 2019 Ellie Award for Best Editing Factual Entertainment. Nick is currently Chairperson of the WA Branch of Australian Screen Editors Guild (ASE).

Nicolette Boaz | Composer

Nicolette Boaz is a Sydney based composer who creates parallel sound for film and television. Nicolette has worked on many documentaries, mainly those with a social conscience. However, world funk remains a special passion: mixing the traditional with contemporary music. She began to learn piano when she was just 4. For 25 years she has composed for all manner of mediums and taught music to children, teenagers, and tertiary level students. She earned a degree in Contemporary Music, was a distinction-average student, majored in composition & Aboriginal studies where she topped her year and was awarded the Gungil Jindaba prize. Now she offers compositions with a wealth of experience working with a deep understanding of ethnic music including Indigenous Australian, funk, classical and jazz, with or without spoken word.



Production Credits

Directed by Sam Lara and Cathy Henkel

Produced by Sam Lara, Cathy Henkel, Ryan Hodgson & Melissa Kelly

Executive Producer – Chris Haws

Editor – Nick Dunlop

Composer – Nicolette Boaz

Sound Design – Envelope Audio

ABC Documentary Manager & *Laura's Choice* Commissioning Editor – Stephen Oliver

Laura's Choice is a Virgo Productions Pty Limited film in collaboration with Factor 30 Films.

Virgo Production is an award-winning, boutique screen industries company based in Perth, Western Australia., who specialise in feature documentaries that tell inspiring, positive, global stories with cross-platform delivery to engage audiences world-wide.

Major 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, RTE), *Walking Through a Minefield* (SBS), *Losing Layla* (ABC, HBO), *Show me the Magic* (ABC, Foxtel Arts), and *The Man who Stole my Mother's Face* (ABC, The Sundance Channel, Tribeca Film Festival Best Feature Documentary 2004, IF Award and broadcast in 26 countries).

#LaurasChoice

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We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work.



Laura at her Mad Hatters Tea Party