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Filmmaker Camilla Rockwell listens as the Hallowell singers perform for a dying patient at Thompson House in Brattleboro.

Filmmaker shows Brattleboro's approach

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN

Reformer Staff

BRATTLEBORO — Camilla Rockwell thinks America has a lot to learn about death and dying.

And Brattleboro, the Burlington filmmaker says, has a lot to teach.

Rockwell has been traveling down to southern Vermont over the past seven months to film a documentary on the way some members of this town have tried to change the way families approach end-of-life issues.

Her subjects include the Hallowell chorus, a volunteer group that sings at the bedsides of the dying, and Deidre Scherer, an internationally known artist who explores the concepts of aging and mortality through her fiber art.

"Talking about death in our culture is difficult," Rockwell said. "In Brattleboro there is an openness about it. This town is a model for how we can support each other and serve and care for each other. There is a gentleness and respect."

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Jason R. Henske/Reformer

Artist Deidre Scherer works on a fiber art rendition in her Williamsville studio.



Jason R. Henske/Reformer
The Hallowell singers, Kathy Leo, Ellen Crockett, Larry Crockett, Mary Cay Brass and Peter Amidon, perform for a patient at Thompson House.

Film

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The film is still in its rough stages, Rockwell said, but when it is complete she hopes it will be shown to nursing and medical students, and to staff at nursing homes and senior centers.

The working title is, "Holding Our Own."

"We are hoping it will be accessible to anyone," said Rockwell. "We want to initiate conversations with end-of-life issues and address concerns that people have a difficult time approaching."

Using the music of Hallowell and the vibrant art of Scherer, Rockwell said, is a pleasing and seductive way for people who have a hard time thinking about dying to start approaching the subject.

Kathy Leo, the director of the Hallowell chorus, has been giving workshops around the state since starting the group in the Brattleboro area.

The group also released a CD recently.

Leo tread lightly on trying to explain her experiences of singing at the beds of dozens of dying people over the past few years.

"The New Age stuff kind of turns people off," she said. "We do bedside singing, that's what we do. When people are caring for their loved ones who are dying, they are holding everything together, and often, as soon as we start singing, everyone starts crying. The music gives people the permission to release."

Scherer, the Williamsville-



Jason R. Henske/Reformer
Artist Deidre Scherer and filmmaker Camilla Rockwell look at a work of art in Scherer's Williamsville studio.

based fiber artist, said she knew right away when Rockwell approached her, that this film would be a good fit with the work she had been devoting her life to over the past few years.

She sits with families at the bedside as loved ones lay dying. Her life-sized fabrics reveal the relationships that are formed over lifetimes, and how those feelings support the families during the periods of grief.

"My artwork has taken me to follow end-of-life issues and it felt like we were going in the same direction," Scherer said about her first meetings with Rockwell. "Art can create dialogue."

Scherer's art work has traveled around the world and she said she gets letters and e-mails from people who see the work and then approach a time of grieving with a new eye.

"It shows that as a society we have not been made aware of this important part of our lives," she said. "If this film gets people thinking and talking about it then we would have succeeded."

Rockwell hopes to have the film completed by the end of this year.

"We hope to have showings and discussion around the state," Rockwell said. "It's going to be something beautiful to look at and beautiful to listen to. We tend to be a culture in denial and have a hard time speaking about how we are going to die. This is going to be a gentle and beautiful way to approach the subject. It ends up being very uplifting, which is not what people expect when they approach the subject of dying."

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