

RIVER RUN FILM FESTIVAL

LETTING GO: Subject is personal for filmmaker

By Mark Burger
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The documentary *Live and Let Go: An American Death* has more personal resonance for its filmmaker than most nonfiction films, because the topic of the film is assisted suicide and the subject is the filmmaker's father.

In June 1998, Sam Niver sat on the deck of his house in Sneads Ferry near the North Carolina coast and died. Sam had been suffering from prostate cancer, and it was clear to him and his family that his days were numbered. But rather than wait for the inevitable, Sam took matters — and his life — into his own hands.

The event was recorded on film by directors Jay Spain and Jay Niver (Sam's son). But *Live and Let Go* is as much a film about life as it is about death. Although the emphasis of the film was on how Sam chose to die with dignity, it also celebrates his life and his spirit.

"The original idea for the documentary was Dad's," Jay Niver said. "He wanted to make a statement."

The subject of one's own mortality is one that most people don't want to consider. "It affects everybody, but it's



Sam Niver says good-bye to son Teigh in *Live and Let Go: An American Death*.

such a tough topic," he said. "When you look to the issue of abortion, it directly affects roughly one-half of the population. But every one of us is going to die at one time or another.

"That bothers a lot of people," Niver

said, "but it doesn't change the fact. People are always trying to define the quality of life for other people. (Dad) was less concerned with dying than he was with the loss of freedom and individuality and autonomy."

Niver said he shares with his late father a strong opinion that people should be allowed to die with dignity. The film reflects this, but "we tried not to hit people over the head with it. (Dad) believed in his right to do it. He did not — and would not — want to impose it on anyone else."

Although Jay Niver and his siblings were in full agreement with Sam's decision, Sam's sisters were not. Niver included their sentiments in the film "in an effort to show all sides of the issue. They respected his decision. We respected their opinions. We just didn't agree."

Niver, an award-winning writer, editor and photographer, had long been interested in making the transition to documentary filmmaker. Remarkably, he wasn't reluctant to document the last months of his father's life, as he recognized the compelling and universal nature of the story.

Sam did not live to see the finished film, of course. But Jay Niver says he believes that *Live and Let Go* does justice to his father's life and his crusade to die with dignity.

"I wish I were more a believer in the afterlife, but I think he'd have been very proud," Niver said. "I'm very pleased with the film. I had never been involved in this issue until Dad got sick, and people who have seen the film have told us how it moved them.

"I don't know if the film will change anyone's mind about assisted suicide, but I'd like for it to make people think more about it," he said.

"When people walk out of the theater, I hope they have a sense of the desperation that some people have in their desire to die peacefully and with dignity."

■ Mark Burger can be reached at 727-7370 or at mburger@wsjournal.com

■ *Live and Let Go: An American Death* will be shown at 2:30 p.m. today in the Gold Theatre at the N.C. School of the Arts.