

The Verge

Pop Culture

Verge Q+A: Dr. Jack Kevorkian

On June 28, 2010 at 6:00 PM



The last time I was in the same room as Jack Kevorkian, I was eleven. He was sitting in a booth adjacent to mine at the Village Place restaurant in West Bloomfield, Michigan. I saw him there all the time, actually. Usually on Tuesdays. I think he liked the meatloaf. He looked frail, even then, and I mostly remember him eating alone. This was about the same time he was becoming national news. He was assisting in suicide after suicide. Doctor Jack Kevorkian was becoming synonymous with the moniker "Doctor Death." Charges would come up and he'd beat them. Again and again, until he went on *60 Minutes* in 1998 and showed Mike Wallace, and the rest of the country, how he personally injected Thomas Youk, a 52-year old ALS patient, with a lethal substance—ending the man's suffering by ending his life. Kevorkian chose to defend himself in the subsequent trial. He was sentenced to ten to twenty five years in prison and was released, in 2007, after eight, nearly dying himself behind bars. One result of all this? Back-to-back original HBO movies. First, Kevorkian was portrayed by Al Pacino, rather stunningly, in *You Don't Know Jack* and tonight, he appears in a Matthew Galkin-directed documentary, simply titled *Kevorkian*. I met up with the Doctor and his attorney Mayer (Mike) Morganroth in the HBO offices just before the latter film's premiere. Kevorkian described his physical condition as "weak," but his convictions haven't lost any of their muscle. At 82, he's still ready as ever for a fight.

GQ: The documentary is largely based on your run for Congress in 2008.

DOCTOR JACK KEVORKIAN: It was whimsical. If I got there fine, if I didn't, fine. Didn't matter to me. You know, I spent very little money. I took no contributions. I knew from talking to people that they sensed something dire happening in this country. They were frustrated, angry. So I says, "Well, I'll get to Congress and maybe shake things up a bit."

GQ: You got about three percent of the vote?

DK: Yeah.

GQ: I thought three percent was pretty good for you.

MAYER (MIKE) MORGANROTH (KEVORKIAN'S ATTORNEY): It was good considering most people walking into the booth just saw his name there and didn't even know he was running. He did no advertising.

DK: See, I wasn't that serious about it because I knew...first of all, I knew what I was dealing with. I had read Thoreau's opinion of all this. It was accurate.

GQ: What was his opinion about it?

DK: Not good. He said suddenly there's candidates up there and you must pick one of them. You don't know who they are. They're picked for you. So you don't choose someone who you think is better for your country, you pick someone that one party has more power to push than the other. And I got to dislike parties, like Jefferson and Madison. I think they're harmful. But the system is flawed so badly. I like what Plato said, long ago. Democracy is fit only for a small country. Can't survive in a large country.

GQ: Talk to me about your discovery of the 9th Amendment.

DK: I was waiting for my last trial to begin, and went to a used bookstore. There was a small book that I saw there that said "*The Constitutional Amendments*." Now, I hadn't really studied them. When I got to the 9th Amendment, I said, "Wow. What I did is Constitutional. I had the right." I followed up in prison. The way it's worded, people have all the rights, whether it's listed in the Constitution or not.

GQ: What wouldn't fall under the 9th Amendment?

DK: All rights fall under it. All the amendments fall under it. It's all personal rights. For myself, I was unjustly, unconstitutionally convicted. Which is all right with me. I knew that was going to happen. You can't criticize me for not trying.

GQ: You felt you needed to go to prison so your case could come before the Supreme Court. Prison was the risk.

DK: It wasn't a risk. It was a consequence I was willing to take.

GQ: Was it crushing to find out the Supreme Court wouldn't hear the case?

DK: No. I expected it. I was a realist.

GQ: When you were working with your patients in the early 90s—133 of them, I believe . . .

DK: I didn't give out the exact number. It's a little over that. Near 140.

GQ: When you were doing that, aiding in suicides, how much of it was about principle? How much was about compassion?

DK: It wasn't ever about compassion. It was my duty. Or else, get out of the profession.

GQ: When did you become a doctor?

DK: '52. I got the degree in '52.

GQ: And Janet Adkins was your first patient in 1990. Is "patient" the right term?

DK: It's really "client". It's a business.

GQ: Client. So, Janet Adkins was your first client in 1990, 38 years after you become a doctor. Why did it take you so long?

DK: Because I had to become aware of it. My mother died of stomach cancer. Terrible pain. Every bone in her body was riddled. I didn't know my younger sister had already requested the doctor to help her end her life. I didn't know

that. It was secret from me. But I saw it myself, these suffering patients, hopeless cases, with pleading eyes, yellow skin, jaundice. I saw it...my God, why don't we help these people? They're suffering. You don't have to feel the pain to know it. You can see it in their eyes, in their behavior. You're gonna let them suffer? If a veterinarian did that, he'd be jailed. So then I got interested in it. I knew at that time, at the end of my internship, that I was for euthanasia, but I didn't discuss it with anybody. I was just starting out in practice. They'd take my license. I wouldn't get a residency anywhere. When they finally took my license, I laughed.

GQ: Where are all those videotapes? The consultations you did with all your clients.

DK: I don't know where they are. I don't have them. I only have about four.

GQ: Do you know where they are?

MM: I have an idea, but won't disclose that.

DK: They're historic. Hundred years from now they'll be playing them on history programs. They're going to hail my name. They're going to put a stamp out with my picture on it, although it appeared on one already once.



GQ: You had a stamp? Where?

DK: On the old Afghan postage. I was on the dollar stamp. In Afghanistan. Before the Taliban. They had Einstein, too.

GQ: I was surprised to see Geoffrey Fieger, your former attorney, in the documentary. I thought you'd cut ties with him prior to the Thomas Youk trial in 1999. But there he was, with you on election night, watching returns.

DK: He's everywhere there's potential for press. When I got out of prison, he called me immediately and said, "come on over for dinner." By standing close to me, he gets publicity.

MM: I was asked whether Geoffrey could come over on election night. I approved it, but Jack didn't know.

GQ: How can we characterize Fieger for a national audience? The people in Michigan already know.

MM: He's a client of mine, I've represented him so I can't say a thing.

DK: I fired him twice because he did things against my wishes just because the publicity was better. And this last trial, I wouldn't let him near me because he would do it in such a way that I'd get an acquittal. Then where am I? I'm right wherever I was all along. I had to change something. I wanted to get to the Supreme Court fast. That's all there was to it. I felt I was running out of time.

GQ: I think a lot of people ask you questions about whether you regret going to prison, or whether you

would have continued doing what you were doing had you not gone, but I can't ask that question because I already know the answer. You went on purpose.

DK: Yes.

GQ: What is your opinion of the Final Exit Network people who are about to go on trial in Georgia for allegedly assisting in suicide?

DK: Frauds. And the three states in this country that have assisted suicide laws, the churches still won there because a doctor can't participate.

GQ: That's Oregon, Washington, and in a sense, Montana.

DK: Yeah. Now, if it's done correctly in a clinical setting, the way it should be, or at home, if the patient wants it, he has more than one choice if it's really a medical service. Just have the life and suffering ended? A layman can do that. He can do it himself, actually. With a gun. Second choice is while he's under anesthesia, instead of going with an overdose and killing him, we take out organs to be used for transplants. So one case of euthanasia could save six other people: two lungs, two kidneys, heart, and liver, and gut, and pancreas even. Could save eight people, potentially. There's value to it, and a layman can't do that. You can donate organs. I've taken kidneys out. The client was Joseph Tushkowski. I took his kidneys. That alone should show you that we could get organs. Two healthy kidneys that nobody would touch. The surgeons were so scared. 'Oh, you got that from euthanasia.' They're healthy kidneys. They'd save two lives.

GQ: Where did you conduct a kidney transplant?

DK: We turned my kitchen where I was renting into an operating room. We had an operating-room nurse there helping us out. I had a doctor helping me out and a technologist.

GQ: You're no longer on parole, correct?

DK: That was only two years.

MM: It was up a year ago.

GQ: Now that your parole is over, do you ever get a phone call from somebody who wants your help dying?

DK: No. First of all, you step into a bunch of controversy. They see that, and I don't blame them.

GQ: You got very sick while you were in prison. You almost died.

DK: I did. I didn't think I would recover. I realized that when I got up from a phone call, fell on the floor, and I couldn't get up. That had never happened to me before. I didn't think I was going to live through prison. I dreaded that. The most indignity would be dying in prison.

GQ: Do you think your condition played a role in your early release?

DK: No. In fact, any sensible governor would have commuted my sentence within six months of my conviction. We had hopes that Granholm would, but she's a coward. A real coward. A political coward. I have no faith in politics, no faith in law. None. I have no respect for law. Jeremy Bentham said it nicely. "Every law is an infraction of liberty." But I knew it was going to be harsh because they were setting me up as an example to doctors. Do this and see what happens.

GQ: I read somewhere that you recently said you injected Janet Adkins the way you injected Thomas Youk—which is what led to your conviction. The procedural departure. Typically, your clients would activate the dying process themselves.

DK: I didn't inject her. I put the needle in and started the machine. She hit the switch that turned on the lethal solution.

GQ: I wanted to ask you about it because the story also talked about whether or not you could now be brought up on new charges regarding Janet Adkins's death.

DK: Sure I could. They can do anything they want. And Thomas Youk was the first one, publicly, I injected. I had to. I wanted to make sure they took the case. But that's not the only one I did. I did others. But no one knows about them.

GQ: Is it okay for you to even say that without putting yourself at risk?

DK: Of course, why not?

MM: Well, it's not really.

DK: Mike, you're being overly scared. I want to see them try to come after me. I just want to see it. I've done several.

GQ: You'd go back to jail?

DK: That's going home. I've been there.

GQ: Will doctor-assisted suicide ever be an available and allowed service in this country?

DK: As a medical service? No, because the profession is run by corrupt politicians. They're not doctors. They're corrupt politicians. And they're cruel, without even knowing it.

GQ: I noticed in the documentary that Fieger has one of your death machines in his office.

DK: Yeah, they all wanted one.



GQ: Like a collector's item?

DK: They were.

GQ: Do you think there's anything you could do at this point to get this case to the Supreme Court?

DK: Reduce the power of the Supreme Court.

GQ: How are you going to reduce the power of the Supreme Court?

DK: Put it under the International Court appeals. But they won't do it. You know, we didn't ratify the International Court of Justice. We didn't sign this time. Doesn't that tell you something? They don't want the enslaving power to be diminished. This way they can enslave easily. The Supreme Court is dictatorial, despotic. It can overrule the president. The country is run by the Supreme Court.

GQ: You smile a lot. You smile a lot in person. You smile a lot in the documentary. You're sitting right here, still smiling, having been through hell.

DK: I learned by going through hell. Now I know what hell is and you don't. I can't tell you how it is, cause you can't

do it with words.

GQ: Since you've been out of prison, you've been filmed for this documentary, you've run for Congress, you've had exhibitions of your paintings, you've had music published and recorded, you've given lectures at Harvard and other universities. What's coming up for you?

DK: Nothing like a lecture. I learned that lectures are ineffective.

GQ: But you're not just going to go home and sit around.

DK: No, no. 9th Amendment things and there's one book coming out next month. We can't talk about it yet. And it's controversial.

GQ: What's it about?

DK: Ask him.

GQ: What's it about?

MM: He can't talk about it.

GQ: It's a book that's so controversial we cannot speak about it here today?

DK: Well, they don't want any adverse publicity. And what I usually write about is not happy news to the public. And the press can really twist it so it's terrible.

GQ: I'm not going to twist it if you just want to say what it is.

MM: No, it would interfere with his contract. He's got a contract.

GQ: Billboards went up in San Francisco this week from the Final Exit Network, the same people I was talking about earlier who are going to trial in Georgia. I think it says "My Life, My Death, My Choice." Does a billboard achieve anything?

DK: No, billboards are ineffective. People who hate it, hate it. People who like the ideas, that's great. What's it going to do? It doesn't say what to do?

GQ: Have the Final Exit people been in contact with you at all?

DK: They avoid me.

GQ: Why?

DK: Because they thought I was hurting the campaign because of my radical moves. They also called me a loose cannon. They are not risk takers. These are timid people. They want to succeed in something big with very little risk, which never happens in life.

GQ: Are you ever in contact with any of your clients' families?

DK: We used to be, before I went to prison.

GQ: Did anyone come to visit you? Did anyone send you letters?

DK: No, nobody in the families did.

GQ: Did you get mail?

DK: Oh yeah, from all over the world.

GQ: If somebody called you tomorrow and said, "Dr. Kevorkian, I want to die and I want you to help me," what would you say?

DK: If it's still considered a crime, I'd do it again, because it's a medical service. It's my obligation.

GQ: Is there anything at all you're afraid of? You certainly don't fear the legal system.

DK: I'm afraid of sudden death. I'd like to know I'm going to die. That's why death row wouldn't be so bad, although it's not pleasant. And cancer, inoperable, wouldn't be bad. That's not pleasant either. But to drop dead suddenly, it's hard on everybody else. My family, my relatives, my friends. It's just not a good way to go. I want to know I'm going to die.

— *Howie Kahn* photo: Courtesy of HBO

[Permalink](#)

[Comments](#)

[Adventures in Contextual Web Advertising](#)

[Tweet of the Day: Which 2,000-Yard Rusher Just Wants To Be Held?](#)

[Pop Culture main](#)

[The Q main](#)