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**FRONTLINE GOES BEHIND THE SCENES WITH POET/UNDERTAKER THOMAS LYNCH AS HE
AND HIS FAMILY CARE FOR BOTH THE LIVING AND THE DEAD**

**FRONTLINE presents
THE UNDERTAKING
Tuesday, October 30, 2007, at 9 P.M. on PBS**

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*Every year I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople.
Another two or three dozen I take to the crematory to be burned ...
I sell caskets, burial vaults, and urns for the ashes ... I am the only undertaker in this town.*
—Thomas Lynch

Thomas Lynch, 58, is a writer and a poet. He's also a funeral director in a small town in central Michigan where he and his family have cared for the dead—and the living—for three generations. For the first time, Lynch agreed to allow cameras inside Lynch & Sons, giving FRONTLINE producers Miri Navasky and Karen O'Connor rare, behind-the-scenes access—from funeral arrangements to the embalming room—to the Lynches' world in *The Undertaking*, airing Tuesday, October 30, 2007, at 9 p.m. on PBS (check local listings).

In his critically acclaimed book, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, excerpted in this film, Lynch chronicles a life spent in the presence of the dead. "We have in some ways become estranged from death and the dead," Lynch believes. "We're among the first couple generations for whom the presence of the dead at their own funerals has become optional. And I see that as probably not good news for the culture at large."

The Lynch family believes that the rituals of a funeral are more than mere formalities. "Funerals are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters," Lynch contends. "A good funeral gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be."

Often people come to Lynch & Sons long before a death. "My mother had a little stroke about a month ago, and those things make you think more about what's going to happen and how you're going to arrange it,"

says Anna Dugan, a retired nurse who came to the Lynches' to pick out a casket. For Dugan's 89-year-old mother, protection, even in death, is important. "She doesn't want water inside her casket. So if she's buried in the ground and it's a wet season of the year, she wants to stay dry."

And it's not just the elderly who face these difficult decisions. Anthony and Nevada Verrino, both in their early 30s, came to Thomas Lynch to talk about funeral plans for their only child, Anthony, who was born in 2004 with a rare genetic syndrome. Although baby Anthony, 24 months old, has defied expectations and come back from the brink of death several times, they know he won't live long, and they speak with remarkable candor about his imminent death. "We still get the question, 'Well, why isn't he—why isn't he eating?'" says Anthony, the baby's father. "And my answer is, 'Because he's dying. You know, because he's dying.'"

"When we're planning ahead," says the young mother, "it might even be in some ways a survival mechanism, because for us it gives us ... steps and procedures of how to do something." Yet the Verrinos also recognize that nothing they do will fully prepare them. "I've spent two years with a very sick baby ... whose prognosis has never been bright," Nevada tells FRONTLINE. "But when I sit and think about the day waking up when he's gone, I can't—I can't prepare for that completely, you know."

Before his father's death, David King had been skeptical about many funeral rituals. "I went into it with a lot of reservations, ... and the viewing of someone's body with makeup and all the stuff that goes along with that can be a really strange, alienating thing. ... I thought the funeral would be a necessary custom, that we'd just have to get through it, [but] it ended up being a real comfort."

For Lynch and his family, their business has always been about more than just caring for the dead. "What I've written is that while the dead don't care, the dead matter," Lynch explains. "The dead matter to the living. In accompanying the dead, getting them where they need to go, we get where we need to be—to the edge of that oblivion and then returned to life with the certain knowledge that life has changed."

The Undertaking is a FRONTLINE co-production with Mead Street Films. The film is produced, written and directed by Miri Navasky and Karen O'Connor. FRONTLINE is produced by WGBH Boston and is broadcast nationwide on PBS. Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers. Major funding for FRONTLINE is provided by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Additional funding is provided by the Park Foundation. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at

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