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A Strong Statement... For My Wife

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By Rhiza Dizon

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Kate Fleming often dedicated her work, simply, "to my wife." Last Thursday, however, it was Charlene Strong's turn to pay tribute to her late partner with the premiere of the documentary *For My Wife* in Los Angeles.

A collaboration between Strong and filmmakers David Rothmiller and L.D. Thompson, the documentary follows the aftermath of an extraordinary yet all-too-common scenario for same-sex couples: A woman is prevented from seeing her dying partner in her hospital room. It's a nightmare too horrible for most couples to imagine, but it happened to Strong on December 14, 2006.

On that evening, a torrential rainstorm flooded the Seattle basement of Fleming and Strong's home. Fleming, an award-winning audiobook narrator, tried to retrieve equipment from the basement studio but became trapped by the rising waters. When a rescue team finally freed Fleming, she was unconscious and rushed to the hospital. Without legal standing as her spouse, Strong was denied access to Fleming by a social worker. Fleming's sister had to be called to give Strong the necessary permission to be with her wife in her final moments. To add insult to injury, the funeral director refused to recognize Strong as Fleming's partner, and instead directed all arrangement questions to Fleming's mother.

"This was the second time I was being told I was no one," Strong said.

A month and a half later, Strong gave courageous testimony before the Washington state legislature. Her story was influential in helping to pass the state's domestic-partnership bill, which provides hospital-visitation and end-of-life decision rights to registered same-sex partners. Strong continues as an active spokeswoman on behalf of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, and has been appointed by Gov. Chris Gregoire to serve on Washington State's human rights commission.

After the screening at the Writer's Guild Theater, Rothmiller, Thompson, and Strong spoke about the documentary and the urgency for the story to be told, especially following the aftermath of Proposition 8. The documentary humanizes the struggle for marriage equality.

"It's going to take the voice of everyone in this room to fight this battle," Rothmiller passionately urged the audience.

"My story is unique, but it's not unique in that the fact that every single day people are denied to be with the person they love," Strong said. "I'm not alone in this issue. It's about anyone, it's about anyone who's ever loved someone. Love speaks louder than anything." *For My Wife* was a true testament to that.

The documentary premiered at the Seattle Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, taking three awards, and is scheduled to premiere in the Australian cities of Sydney and Melbourne in the coming months. The screening in Los Angeles was a collaboration between the WGA, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in conjunction with Honor PAC, the Jordan-Rustin Coalition, API Equality, and the the Writers Guild of America-West GLWC.