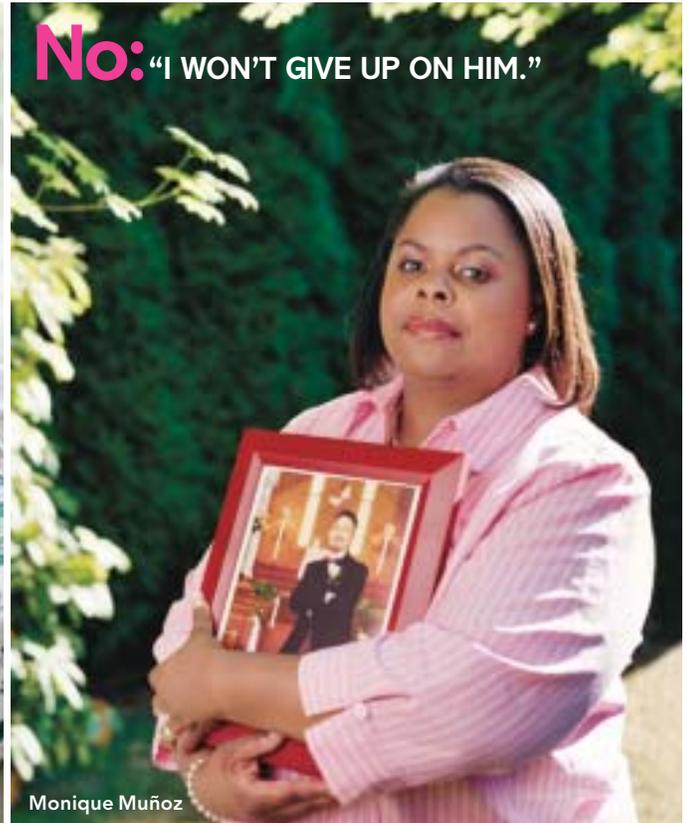
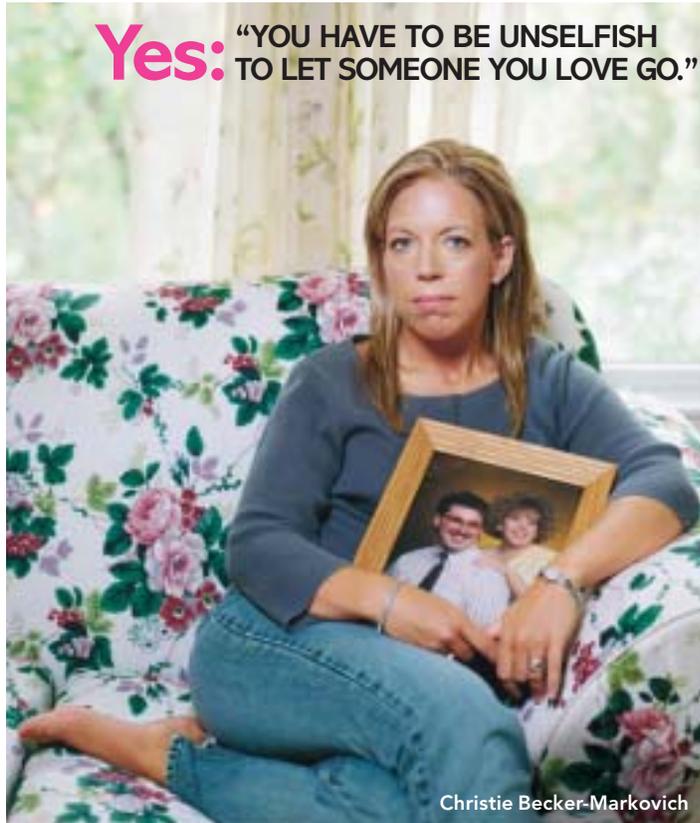


# Could you let your husband die?



*It was a familiar news story this year: An inexplicable accident leaves a young person horribly debilitated, and an anguished spouse must decide between life and death. Monique Muñoz and Christie Becker-Markovich had to make that gut-wrenching choice. For the first time, these two women discuss their emotional decisions, and how they're living with the consequences every day. By Shaun Assael*

**MONIQUE'S STORY** "Did you see that?" Monique Muñoz, 36, asks. "I've never seen him do that before."

Her 47-year-old husband, Rene, is sitting in the garden of a Seattle nursing home, his wheelchair tilted back so that his head is pointed to the sky. His mouth hangs open, one arm rests at a stiff right angle and the other is contorted into a "z." Suddenly he lets out a dry, cracked sigh and his bony, pointed shoulders shake. "That," she says. "I've never seen him move that way before." Small changes like these give her hope that someday he'll once again be the handsome, muscular man she married.

In October 2004, Rene, a construction worker, was

repairing a roof when a bee stung him. He lost consciousness, and anaphylactic shock caused his windpipe to close, restricting air to his brain. As a result Rene has severe anoxic brain injury, which has left his muscles rigid and immobile. To someone who hasn't observed him day in and day out the way Monique has, he appears unable to communicate.

Monique, a strategic planner for a luxury-travel company and the mother of two children from her first marriage, has spent at least part of every day for the last year by Rene's side. While some might see his condition as hopeless, Monique sees a man fighting to get out of his frozen shell. As Rene's eyes follow Monique, she bends down to kiss

him. “You’re in there, honey,” she says. “I know you are.”

Monique isn’t used to indulging uncertainty. She grew up in Seattle, where her family belonged to a Pentecostal church; there girls were taught to be practical and driven, and couldn’t wear nail polish, makeup or pants. By 16, Monique was working after school as a receptionist for a software company and helping care for her two younger brothers and a stream of foster kids who shared their five-bedroom house. One child had autism; others had learning and behavioral disabilities. She helped them with their homework and took them to play in the park.

She met her first husband during her senior year in high school. But by 2000, they both realized they didn’t share the same ambitions. In June 2001, Monique’s mom, Freddie, invited her to meet a minister who had a small church in nearby Everett. Rene Muñoz was 5’11”, with wavy black hair and a magnetic personality. One Saturday night, during a service, he placed his fingers on Monique’s forehead and prayed for her, saying something important would happen in her marriage. She cried when she heard this, because she believed her shaky union was too far gone to be salvaged. In the spring of 2002, Monique filed for divorce.

Soon Monique and Rene began dating. “We realized there was a connection,” Monique says. “It was the odd feeling of someone understanding you better than your own family.” She learned that Rene had grown up in Los Angeles, a young man with no special calling until he joined a Christian church. There, he had an awakening. When he wasn’t doing construction, he worked as a minister, eventually settling with his wife and three kids in Washington state. But the marriage fell apart. He was divorced when he met Monique. “We fell in love with each other’s spirits,” she says. On Valentine’s Day of 2004, Rene proposed; in May they were married.

Four months after the wedding, Monique was in bed, e-mailing a friend to say how wonderfully her life was going, when one of her husband’s coworkers from the roofing job called to say that Rene had been in an accident. “No one told me how bad it was,” she says.

Monique arrived at Seattle’s Northwest Hospital & Medical Center to find Rene connected to a respirator. His eyes were closed, his strong body flaccid. Doctors couldn’t tell her what the outlook was, she says. “He lost a lot of oxygen to his brain,” she recalls one doctor saying to her. “We’ll just have to watch him for the next few days.” She took the advice literally, sleeping by Rene’s side. For the first 48 hours, his eyes remained closed. When he opened them they were glassy and unmoving.

What was going on inside his head remained a mystery. A couple of weeks later, his eyes began moving from side to side, a reaction known as tracking. But it was unclear whether that was a nervous reflex or conscious movement. Once, Monique leaned in to Rene and whispered “I love you,” and he started crying. Was Rene trying to show that he heard her? Or was he tired? After all, medical experts say tears in paralytic patients can be a reaction to fatigue. Monique, however, points out that when Rene is tired he kicks his leg.

In December 2004, after two months with little change in Rene’s condition, a doctor asked Monique if she could accept the idea that Rene might never recover. “If this ever happened to me, I’d hope my loved ones would let the infections take me,” the doctor said. “I would not want to live like that.” Monique and Rene had never discussed what to do if something tragic happened to either of them, so she answered the only way she knew how: “I refuse to believe that God spared his life without a reason. I was taught to believe that God makes the decisions about when life starts and ends—not us.”

As the weeks and months ticked away, Rene’s doctors remained uncertain about his long-term outlook. “His MRI is consistent with marked abnormalities in certain areas of the brain,” says Val Siemion, M.D., a geriatrics specialist at Evergreen Hospital in Kirkland, Washington, and the medical director of Rene’s nursing home, who sees Rene about once a week. Dr. Siemion concedes that brain injuries are not like a heart attack. “With this type of injury, you can’t predict things quite as easily,” she says. “But if he got up and walked out of bed, I’d call that a miracle. What you hope for is that you can find the highest level of cognitive function possible, such as some ability to reason.”

In March 2005, a new worry arose. Monique had exhausted her annual insurance coverage for therapeutic nursing; she’d have to pay out-of-pocket for Rene’s care or bring him home and leave her job to tend to him. “I had no idea what to do,” she says. “Rene isn’t old enough to qualify for Medicare, and I made too much for Medicaid.

She talked to several social workers, who suggested that she divorce Rene so that he could be declared indigent. Legally that



“God makes the decisions about when life starts and ends—not us.”



Monique at home and, above, with Rene on their 2004 honeymoon

CORAL VON ZIMWALT. INSET: COURTESY OF MONIQUE MUÑOZ

“God took him and all I was handed back was a shell.”



Christie at home. Right, Steve and their oldest son, Kyle.

**CHRISTIE'S STORY** Christie Becker-Markovich, 32, is holding a photo of her late husband, Steve, and starting to talk about how she ended his life, when their three sons run into her St. Louis home. In the photo, Steve is 280 pounds, with a restless mane of black hair and pink cheeks that frame a crooked, self-effacing smile. It's the same smile that Kyle, Bryce and Alec are wearing as they run toward her. When 11-year-old Kyle sees the photo of his dad, he stops in his tracks, prompting his nine- and seven-year-old brothers to do the same.

Christie decides to wade gingerly into their thoughts.

“Where's Daddy?” she asks.

“In heaven,” Kyle answers in a whisper.

“And what does he do there?”

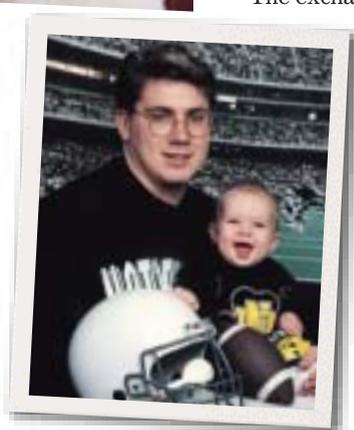
“Watch over us,” Bryce adds.

“And where does he live?”

“In our hearts,” all three say.

The exchange represents a hard-

earned piece of parenting for Christie, who five years ago made the decision to let Steve die. An untreated cyst had resulted in a buildup of spinal fluid in his brain, and the pressure caused a blood vessel to burst, ripping Steve's brain from its stem. After emergency surgery, his heart was beating,



but his body had lost its command center. Occasionally his eyes would dart at the sound of Christie's voice, but his body was in a hideous state of atrophy, his limbs curling inward as if ready to return to their fetal origins. “It's not the way he would have wanted the boys to remember him,” Christie says. “I truly believe that.”

At first glance, she seems like any other perky suburban mom, with a quick smile and a lively interest in what's going on in the neighborhood. But there's very little that's typical about Christie, who works as a state probation and parole officer. As she travels into some of her city's poorest neighborhoods, she draws on her own memories of growing up with hardship, with a single mom who worked long hours as a bartender to support her two daughters. Christie and her younger sister, Carrie, would linger by supermarket freezer sections during summers to stay cool. On Christmas a local charity left food baskets on their stoop.

Christie knew she'd have to work for any extras, and by her junior year of high school, she was supervisor at the movie theater where she met Steve Becker. He was two years older, a rugged college freshman who ran the

would have meant that control over his care would pass from her to his family. Monique is circumspect about her in-laws, but she admits that they don't get along, and that they disagree about Rene's care. Just as the insurance crisis was reaching its height, so did the Terri Schiavo case; Monique thought Michael Schiavo was “inhumane” for deciding to end his wife's life. So when an acquaintance asked her, “What's your take on letting Rene go?” Monique looked straight into the man's eyes. “The only place Rene is going after he's released,” she said, “is home with me.”

Desperate, Monique called every state insurance official she could find. Finally one agreed to count Monique's income separately from Rene's, which meant he'd qualify for Medicaid. “God provided a miracle,” she says.

The real miracle may be Monique's determination to keep Rene in her life. She visits him daily, carefully applying her makeup because, she says, “I don't like him to see me without it.” Sometimes on Sundays she takes him to church in a specially equipped van.

Her commitment is illustrated by a piece of paper that hangs above his bed. It's a list that she's written for his nurses and includes tips such as “Please talk to him and let him know what you are doing at all times.” The last one reads: “You can contact his wife AT ANY TIME DAY OR NIGHT... She really means anytime!”

But in the wee hours of the morning, in that dark time when nothing good happens, the calls have started to come more frequently. Rene's catheter has caused an infection, and he has bouts of vomiting. Nonetheless Monique continues to believe that God and her husband want her to keep up the fight. “For my belief system, there's no alternative to what I'm doing,” she says. “The only alternative is murder.”

# Who will decide for you?

*Nobody likes to think about death, but you can make painful end-of-life decisions easier for you and your spouse if you both draw up living wills. Here's how to do it right.*

**1 Know the basics** A "living will" specifies what you want doctors to do—or not do—to save your life. It should be written in simple, concrete language. For example: "If my condition is terminal and with no hope of recovery, I do not want to be kept alive by artificial life support." Or: "If a feeding tube will prolong my life, don't remove it." For living will forms, go to [caringinfo.org](http://caringinfo.org).

**2 Give someone power-of-attorney privileges** Living wills can't cover every situation, so make sure you indicate who should make the medical decisions if you become incapacitated. "Sometimes a wife or mother isn't the best choice for this task," says Los Angeles attorney Martha Jo Patterson. "The person you choose must be strong on that difficult day and willing to make tough decisions."

**3 Remember to write a pregnancy clause** You can specify in your living will whether you'd want doctors to save yourself or your unborn baby first if you are pregnant when you become incapacitated, and what sorts of extraordinary means you want taken (though sometimes state laws can supersede your decision). You can also leave those decisions to your husband, or the person you've already designated with power-of-attorney. —MARIDEL REYES

concession stand. "His eyes were deep blue," says Christie, "with dark lashes that made his eyes twinkle."

Steve's mother, Marge Sutter, didn't approve of Christie and made that plain once they started dating, about a year after they met. ("I thought she was the pushy type," says Marge now.) But as the years passed after Steve and Christie married, the family learned to get along. The Beckers worked hard to support their three boys. Steve took a management job with a convenience-store chain, while Christie worked as a probation officer and police dispatcher. Then, on Sunday, February 27, 2000, Christie got an unsettling call. Steve needed her to pick him up from the store. His head was pounding. He was seeing spots. Christie arrived to find him lying in their parked minivan, shaking, with the heat on full blast. "My head hurts so bad, it's unbelievable," he said.

A CAT scan at St. John's Mercy Hospital revealed the cyst on Steve's brain. Christie was horrified, but Steve was strangely serene. Now that he'd been diagnosed, he could be treated. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll be fine. Promise."

But when Christie brought the boys to visit the next day, she found his bed empty. A nurse sent them to the basement, where Steve had been taken for an emergency MRI. As soon as the elevator opened, Christie could see something was wrong. Doctors were running at full speed. The pressure from the cyst had grown so great that it had trig-

gered an explosion in Steve's brain. "We lost your husband, Mrs. Becker," one of the doctors said. "We're trying to get him back." The physicians urged her to talk to Steve; the sound of her voice, they said, might bring him around. Leaving the kids in a waiting area, Christie dashed into the hallway as Steve was being wheeled to the operating room. She ran alongside the gurney as doctors pounded his chest. "Steve," she cried. "Wake up. Steve! Please wake up!"

Doctors finally pulled her away. When Steve came out of surgery, he was alive but in a persistent vegetative state. His eyes moved and his legs responded to pressure, but it was just a reflex. "His life is over as you know it," a neurologist explained, and then asked her what she'd like to do next.

Christie didn't understand. When she spoke to Steve, his eyelids opened. When she bent down to kiss him, he'd suck in his lower lip, as if to kiss her back. "He's been my partner for 10 years," she told the doctors. "I'm not going to say goodbye to him after three days."

But as March turned to April and then May of 2000, Christie began to understand what the neurologist had meant. "I realized that Steve never reacted on cue," she says. "Sometimes it took a half hour for him to move his eyes after I spoke to him." She spent hours by Steve's bed every day, brushing his teeth, massaging his legs. All the while, she tried to ignore the smells that conspired against hope: the stale air exhaled through his respirator, the odor of liquid food snaking through his feeding tube.

As the months passed Christie's optimism darkened. The Catholicism that she shared with Steve taught her that life is sacred, but could this be called living? She and Steve had spoken in the most general terms about what kind of deaths they'd want, and she believed he wouldn't want to be kept on life support. But since they hadn't talked more explicitly, she sought advice from the nuns and neurologists on the hospital's ethics committee. "They told me to listen to what my faith, and God, were telling me, and to think of what Steve might want," she says.

In a phone conversation with Christie, Steve's mother made her position absolutely clear. "If it was Steven's time, then God would have already taken him," Marge said. Christie replied: "God did take him, and all I was handed back was a shell. I think I need to let him go."

Her mother-in-law wasn't about to give up so easily. On June 1, Marge filed a restraining order to keep her son alive. Press from around the region seized on the case, and protesters followed. When Christie visited Steve, she had to run a gauntlet of right-to-life activists stationed outside the hospital. One day, Christie recalls, Kyle, then six, came home from school asking, "What's a murderer?" Why, she asked. Because, he said, another kid's parent was calling her one. If that wasn't enough, the archbishop of St. Louis weighed in with a public statement affirming the sanctity of life.

"I was devastated," Christie says. "There were days when I thought, please, God, don't let make me wake up tomorrow. I felt like my life was on hold, like I didn't have any control. These people who didn't really care about Steve or the boys had taken it over."

In September 2000 a judge ruled in Christie's favor. Minutes after the ruling a reporter asked her what it felt like to win. She looked at him with disbelief. "My sons lost their father, I lost my husband and Marge lost her only child," she said. "There are no winners here."

Now she had to find a way to (continued on page 294)

carry out Steve's wishes without turning his death into a circus—or letting Marge find out. On the evening of October 4, two nurses arrived at Steve's room, ostensibly to take him for tests. Instead, they carried him to a van waiting in the hospital lot. Under cover of dark, the van drove toward the Becker home, where a small group was ready to offer assistance: two priests, a nun, a nurse and a doctor who would stay at Steve's side until the end. Christie had sent her boys to her mother's house, so she led the group to Kyle's room, which was the hardest to peer into from outside. A Mickey Mouse blanket lay on the bed. Christie gently folded it back to make way for Steve.

For the next five days, while Steve lay sleeping—with no food entering his body—pandemonium broke loose in the town. Right-to-life protesters scoured St. Louis-area hospitals and nursing homes, looking for the missing man. Hoping that she could still bring the family together, Christie met with Marge and offered to let her see her son, as long as she did every-

thing necessary to keep Steve's whereabouts secret. Marge refused.

On the fifth day the physician told Christie that Steve was near death. She had the boys brought home. "It's time for you to say goodbye," she said. Six-year-old Kyle went to his bed and clambered on top. "Daddy," he said. "It's OK if you want to be an angel. I'll always remember you." Bryce agreed. Alec nuzzled up to his dad. Finally Christie climbed in. She wrapped her arms around Steve and rocked him.

She was still rocking him an hour after he had finally been pronounced dead.

Christie spent the next two years consumed by rage at her in-laws, until she realized that her anger was destroying her. "I didn't like who I'd become," she says. So she wrote Marge a letter. It began, "We don't have to like each other. But for the sake of the kids, we have to respect each other." She heard nothing for a week. Then Marge called to say that she wanted to see more of her grandchildren.

Today Christie and Marge have made a kind of shaky peace. Marge visits regularly, and Christie can empathize with her. "Every day I think, what if it had been one

of my sons in that hospital," says Christie. "Remember the first time you held your child? It's a miracle. And I was telling Marge her miracle was gone."

Marge, too, is trying to be more understanding. "I can see now that Christie did what she felt was right at the time," she says. "But I still think my son would have wanted to fight."

Christie is remarried and has two more kids—Ethan and Claire—with her new husband, bank analyst Jason Markovich; from time to time, Jason takes out photos of Steve to look at with Kyle, Bryce and Alec. For her part, Christie is telling her story now because she needs to hear it said aloud. She sees it as a dress rehearsal for the day when she'll ask her boys the inevitable question: Do you think Mommy did the right thing?

"I've saved every scrap of paper from the case because I want them to make their own decision," she says. "They might not agree with their mother. But I want them to know I did the best I could."

*Shaun Assael is a senior writer for ESPN The Magazine.* ©

## **Glamour 2005 Women of the Year Gift Bag Contest**

NO PURCHASE OR PAYMENT OF ANY KIND IS NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN THIS CONTEST.

1. Promotion begins 12:01 A.M. ET on November 8, 2005, and ends 11:59 P.M. ET on December 4, 2005, when all entries must be received. Enter by completing the entry form at [glamour.com](http://glamour.com). All entries must be original work by the entrant and must be received by 11:59 P.M. EST on December 11, 2005.

2. Five (5) potential winners will be chosen by *Glamour* editors on or about January 23, 2005, based on answers to the question "Who is your Woman of the Year and why?" Please limit answers to 50 words or less. *Glamour* will be judging the entries on originality, reasoning and humor. The potential winners will be contacted by telephone, e-mail and/or mail. If a potential winner cannot be contacted or does not respond to attempted contact within ten (10) days, or prize notification is returned as undeliverable, such potential winner forfeits all rights to any prize, and an alternate winner may be selected. All decisions of the judges are final and binding in all respects. Each of the five winners will receive the following: Pioneer AirWare satellite radio (\$315 Approximate Retail Value); one-year XM satellite radio subscription (ARV \$155); Rafé Double Dutch Clutch (\$135 ARV); L'Oréal Paris Volume Shocking 2-Step Volume Construction Mascara (\$13 ARV); L'Oréal Paris Endless Kissable ShineWear Kit (\$11 ARV); L'Oréal Paris ReFinish Micro-Dermabrasion kit (\$25 ARV); L'Oréal Studio Line Hot Straight Cream (\$4 ARV); Moon Rock stationery – notepaper and pencil set (\$25 ARV); Peacock Alley blanket (\$90 ARV); Yarnz cashmere scarf (\$110 ARV); Timex Glamtone Perpetual Calendar watch (\$75 ARV); Trish McEvoy candle (\$40

ARV); Ted Baker sunglasses – aviator pair (\$160 ARV); MarieBelle chocolates (\$7 ARV), all stuffed into a M Z Wallace The Large New York Tote (\$285 ARV). The total approximate retail value of each gift bag is \$1,450.

3. Income and other taxes, if any, are the sole responsibility of the winner.

4. Only legal residents of the 50 United States and the District of Columbia who are 18 years old or older as of the date of entry are eligible to enter. Employees of The Condé Nast Publications and members of their immediate families are not eligible.

5. Subject to all federal, state and local laws and regulations. Void outside the 50 United States and the District of Columbia, and where prohibited. Any violation of these rules may result in disqualification. Sponsor is not responsible for errors in the administration or fulfillment of this sweepstakes, including without limitation mechanical, human, printing, distribution, communication or production errors, and may modify or cancel this promotion based upon such error at its sole discretion without liability.

6. Prize not transferable. No substitutions for prize except by Sponsor in which case a prize of equal or greater value will be substituted. Only one prize per family, household, or address.

7. All entries become the property of Sponsor and will not be acknowledged or returned. By providing your e-mail address, you grant Sponsor the right to send you commercial messages and share your address with others, unless specified otherwise as indicated on the entry form.

8. Except where prohibited: (i) acceptance of prize constitutes consent to use winner's name and likeness for editorial, advertising and publicity purposes, without further compensation;

(ii) potential winner may be required to sign an affidavit of eligibility (including social security number) and liability/publicity release. Affidavits and releases must be returned within ten (10) days of attempted notification or an alternate winner may be chosen.

9. Entries that are lost, late, misdirected, incorrect, garbled or incompletely received, for any reason, including by reason of hardware, software, browser or network failure, malfunction, congestion, or incompatibility at Sponsor's server or elsewhere, will not be eligible. Sponsor in its sole discretion reserves the right to disqualify any person tampering with the entry process or the operation of the website. Use of bots or any other automated process to enter is prohibited and may result in disqualification at the sole discretion of Sponsor. Sponsor further reserves the right to cancel, terminate or modify any promotion not capable of completion as planned, including infection by computer virus, bugs, tampering, unauthorized intervention, force majeure or technical failures of any sort. In the event of a dispute, entries will be deemed submitted by the authorized account holder of the e-mail address submitted at the time of entry. "Authorized account holder" is defined as the natural person who is assigned to an e-mail address by an Internet Access Provider, online service provider or other organization (e.g., business, educational institute) that is responsible for assigning e-mail addresses for the domain associated with the submitted e-mail address.

10. For a list of winners send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to *Glamour* – 2005 Women of the Year Gift Bag Contest Winners List, c/o *Glamour* Magazine, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036 after January 23, 2006, but before July 22, 2006. The Sponsor of this contest is The Condé Nast Publications: 4 Times Square, New York, NY.