

A Very Special New Year's Day Column

Written by Robert Mladinich
Wednesday, 30 December 2009 18:00

It has been just over four months since Nick Charles, the play-by-play announcer for Shobox: The New Generation, was diagnosed with stage IV bladder cancer and forced to take a medical hiatus from the monthly show that has aired since 2001.

Since then he has undergone grueling chemotherapy treatments that have resulted in him losing all of his hair as he forces himself to live as normal of a life as possible. Through sheer force of will, as well as the strength and support that he receives from his wonderfully loving family and his strong Christian faith, the 63-year-old Charles has managed to keep his weight up while not falling prey to the always lingering threats of depression, cynicism and negativity.

If one was unaware that he was battling such an insidious disease, you'd never know from talking on the phone to him that he has been to hell and back. He has lost none of the inspiring energy that has endeared him to members of the boxing community and legions of worldwide viewers.

"I'm doing great," Charles said during a telephone conversation on December 30th. "I've been off the chemo for a month, and the doctors have told me that I'm 80 percent in remission. I'm going to see them again in three months. It may come back, but if it takes one year, or two years, or however long, I'm going to make the most of the good time."

As physically and emotionally wrenching as the grim diagnosis and subsequent treatment has been, even for someone as perpetually positive as Charles, the longtime announcer said a lot of good things have come from it.

Having been married three times, Charles is the father of four children: Jason, 38, Melissa, 34, Charlotte, 22, and Giovanna, 3 ½.

While Charles is not big on regrets, he is the first to admit that he wasn't always there for his older children. For many years he traveled the world as a CNN correspondent, often putting the demands of his career above all else, including those closest to him. Nowhere was the strain more evident than in his relationship with Melissa.

Having been divorced from Melissa's mother since 1977, Charles said his relationship with that daughter has been especially "hot and cold, all of our lives."

His illness has enabled them to forge a relationship that has been "based on a massive amount of forgiveness and understanding."

"This has had a tremendous healing effect on both of us," said Charles. "My illness has had a fortifying effect on a lot of things, the most important of which is my relationships with my family."

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That also includes his first wife, with whom he has had an often acrimonious relationship over the past three decades.

“It took a long time for the scab to become a scar, but we had lunch one day and it was so great to once again see the gentle, soft sides of each other,” he explained. “The whole divorce process creates a hardness that doesn’t always go away.”

Charles is also the grandfather to three children, some of whom are about the same age as his youngest daughter. He jokes that he has a “nuclear 21st century family” because of the similar ages of two generations of children. One of the hardest things for him has been the realization that he can’t always play with them in manner in which he would like.

“The hemoglobin is the fuel in your tank, so when it’s low you can’t will yourself to do things no matter how much you want to,” said Charles. “You can’t just sleep it off or work through it. I don’t want the kids to wonder why I can’t play in the backyard with them, or kick a soccer ball, or throw them in the air.”

Particularly difficult is when Giovanna reminds her father of how handsome he is, but then innocently asks him what happened to his hair, eyebrows and lashes.

“You try to keep things on a need to know basis, which is not easy when dealing with curious kids,” said Charles.

While Charles might look like the kind of guy that things have often come easy to, the reality is that his beginnings were far from auspicious. But, he says, his often challenging Chicago childhood blessed him with the steely resolve that has helped him so much during the arduous journey he is now on.

“I had it pretty rough growing up,” he explained. “I remember the lights and the heat being shut off and eating mustard sandwiches. I went to work at 13 and always had insecurities about the future. But I always expected and saw the best in people, so when I got sick, never once did I say ‘Why me?’”

Since taking a leave of absence from Shobox, the outpouring of support from the boxing community has warmed Charles’s heart. For a guy that is battling for his life, he actually considers himself fortunate to be surrounded by so much goodness in both his personal and professional lives.

“I always hear that boxing people are ruthless, but I couldn’t disagree more,” said Charles. “I’ve probably received about 1,000 e-mails, and people are always following in sending their best wishes. From the relatively unknown people in boxing to many of the more famous people, there has been an outpouring of true affection.”

Charles said that the Top Rank organization has been exceedingly kind and gracious. He was touched beyond description when he learned that officials in Oklahoma got special permission to have a seamstress sew “Keep Fighting Nick” onto their sleeves. He chokes up when talking

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about cut man Stitch Duran giving up an endorsement opportunity so he could put Charles's name on his outfit. He never tires of hearing shout-outs from fighters on television.

Charles has always been a people person with an inordinate faith in the goodness of his fellow man. Battling this illness has only made his already strong faith in humanity even stronger.

"Adversity is a great teacher, and it really teaches you who your genuine friends are," said Charles. "I have a lot of friends."

He also has a remarkable wife, Cory, a CNN producer to whom he has been married for 11 years. She is the daughter of an electrician, a self-made woman who exudes all of the warmth of her native Brooklyn. She has reinforced her husband's spiritual base by her love, optimism and strength of character.

"If I get down, she reminds me to not get too caught up," said Charles. "I believe in eternity, and that has put me pretty much at peace."

More than anything else, Charles wants to get himself back behind a microphone sooner rather than later, and hopefully on Shobox. He is the first to admit that viewers "don't watch the series to see Nick Charles," but he is proud of the fact that he was "part of the identity" of such a popular show.

"And people love comeback stories," added Charles. "That's the message I'm getting from the people out there."

In boxing the word "champion" is often overused because it pertains only to winning belts and receiving worldwide recognition for being the best at your craft. The reality is that life's real champions have other qualities, such as the innate ability to treat people well and always make them feel better about themselves, especially when the recipients of the goodwill are in no position to give them anything back.

By that standard of measure, Charles is as much, if not more of a champion than all of the boxers he has covered during the nine years that Shobox has been on the air.

I know I speak for scores of others when I say, "Happy New Year, Champ. We hope that you are the comeback story of the year in 2010."