

REST IN PEACE, NICK CHARLES

Written by Ron Borges
Saturday, 25 June 2011 17:50



Some people can show you how to live. A very few can show you how to die. Only the special ones can show you both. Nick Charles was special.

A ground-breaking sports anchor at CNN for 21 years and the voice of SHOWTIME boxing for a decade, Charles passed away yesterday at 64, a fighter gone well before his time. For those who loved him, which were many, and for those who just knew him, which was about everyone he ever met, he hasn't gone anywhere though, because he's still here in memories of how a man should live and lessons about how a man should die.

The end is never easy, as Charles learned over many years watching fighters do battle. He chronicled brave fighters who weren't quite fast enough or quite young enough or quite skilled enough or quite lucky enough on a particular night to survive the battle, seeing how they all fought to the end, accepting the consequences before they had arrived but struggling through

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the pain until there was no more struggle left in them.

That's how Nicholas Charles Nickeas, known to the world as Nick Charles, faced his losing battle with stage four bladder cancer. He looked it in the eye. He studied it. He fought it with all his might for as long as he could. Finally he said, "All right. You win but that doesn't mean I lose."

Charles first learned in August 2009 that he had been attacked by a cancer that is undefeated. Initially he went to the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, considered to be perhaps the best in the world, and took all the chemotherapy a man could stand to fight back. He did it for himself, for his wife Cory, for his five-year-old daughter Giovanna and for his three adult children from two earlier marriages, Jason, Melissa and Katie.

Unknowingly, he did it for all of us too because he showed those who knew him that while eventually the forces of the universe may beat you down they do not, necessarily, have to defeat you. To the end, Nick Charles had his hand raised. Cancer didn't win. He did, because once he knew the disease had come back with such a vengeance there was no holding it off – an experience he aptly described as reminding him of the look on Thomas Hearn's face when he realized nothing could keep Marvin Hagler off him – he gave cancer the slip.

Instead of taking another grueling round of chemo that would have made his last months a misery, he said "Enough" and chose to live the time he had left with his family, making every day the best day he could.

He once told a CNN reporter that his disease was "a gift from God where I need to build these memories for (Giovanna), so that I'm not a blur. What is life? It's 20 per cent what happens to you and 80 per cent how you react to it."

And so he spent his final months visiting with friends in person and online, playing Candyland and wrestling with his daughter and making videotaped messages for her future birthdays, ones he would never see, in which he expressed the unadulterated pureness of blind love.

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He spent them holding his wife's hand too and, in a symbolic exercise that reminded us all that life goes on even after you depart, he lovingly researched the purchase of a piano for his young daughter. That piano and the house he recently completed and moved into in Santa Fe, were both gifts and milestones.

He wanted to live long enough to move into that dream house. He did. He wanted to live long enough to see his daughter play that piano. He did. He wanted to live to his 65th birthday too. He didn't quite make that but the way he lived his life since that deadly diagnosis 22 months ago insured he would live on in the hearts and minds of many people he never met, people who watched him talking bravely but also serenely on CNN about life and death and what's really important.

He must have said, "Always look for the best" more times than anyone in history. Frankly, he probably did that more times than anyone in history too and that, really, was the point of his final years. He didn't just talk the talk (even though he was paid to talk and talk since the age of 24), he walked the walk.

Nick Charles had been a fighter all his life. First as a kid with a non-existent father growing up poor in a tough part of Chicago, a kid whose epiphany came as a teenager when he was told while working on a produce loading dock to put on rubber gloves and boots and scrub away the rat feces that had piled up. He would revisit that moment often in later years, explaining it was the night he decided he would escape a life that seemed to have him entrapped.

He did, first at Columbia College of Chicago, then as a do-it-all sportscaster at WICS in Springfield, Ill. The day they called to offer him his first broadcasting job they asked him to take a \$70 cut in pay from his \$200 a week earnings as a Chicago cab driver. He didn't think twice.

He did it but soon learned he'd have to do more. They said his name was no good for TV, insisting he shorten it to Nick Charles. He did that too and within a decade he was the first sports anchor at a new-fangled idea called CNN.

A lot of people thought Ted Turner was nuts to believe people would watch news 24 hours a day. As it turned out, a lot of people were nuts about news and soon they went nuts over Charles, whose flowing locks, good looks and pleasant style repeatedly had him voted "sexiest

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sportcaster in America” by the Television Fans Association.

Charles and Fred Hickman created “Sports Tonight” together at CNN, a nightly sportscast that beat ESPN at its own game for nearly all of the 17 years of its existence. Hickman and Charles were a black and white pairing like nothing TV had ever seen before. Some would say TV hasn’t seen anything like them since either.

They worked together as smoothly as ebony and ivory piano keys and the music they made showed a generation of sports enthusiasts the best of how to report a story and how to present it. They covered everything but always boxing was where Nick Charles seemed most at home.

Maybe that’s because he was a fighter himself, growing up so poor he’d huddle in the same bed with his mother and brother to stay warm when the heat was turned off in the depth of a Chicago winter yet triumphing over a disadvantaged start.

Maybe it was because he understood struggle and pain and respected fighters so much for their ability to accept both and still press on. As it turned out he did more than understand it, he lived it in his own life.

By the end, most of the hair that had once been his trademark was gone. The once rock-hard body had been ravaged, his face was hollowed out by disease and he needed a helping hand from time to time to climb a few steps or to steady him when he stood. Yet when HBO gave him one last turn behind the microphone for a Boxing After Dark show a few months before his death none of that mattered. Behind a microphone he was the same guy he always was that night - his voice strong, his facts straight, his call precise and his respect for the fighters’ struggle as apparent and as loving as always.

On Saturday he finally had to fold the losing hand that had been dealt him by a power greater than us all but as it turned out Nick Charles won that round too, just as he had all the others.

Sure he died too young, passing away from an undefeated enemy called fourth stage bladder cancer a few months before his 65th birthday but before he passed on he’d lived a life so full he

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made you feel like it had been given to him by Santa Claus.

From finally finding happiness with his wife of 13 years to finding God in 1992 by virtue of her guiding hand to the joy of watching his five-year-old daughter grow up to play that piano he'd bought her after months of research to be sure it was – as his boxing broadcasts always were – JUST RIGHT! - Nick Charles lived.

He lived to the very last hours, ones he spent looking out on the ruggedly beautiful landscape of his beloved Santa Fe. To the end he chose life. Shouldn't we all?

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DaveB says:

The day I dreaded coming is now here. Nick Charles was an old an familiar friend in broadcasting. What an amazing man. Anyone can look good when everything is in their favor, only a really special human being can be good when life goes against them. Arthur Ashe and Nick Charles were two such men. God bless you Nick Charles and family. You leave behind some awfully big shoes to fill.

the Roast says:

Very sorry to hear about the passing of Nick Charles. Great voice of boxing over the years. My condolences to Nick's family and friends. R.I.P. Nick.

Radam G says:

My deepest condolences. Much luv, Nick! I'm already missin' ya, bro! I hope to see at the crossroad in the morning on that day. Holla!

amayseng says:

in march on hbo he said he wanted to be an inspiration and he was and still is,
cancer is a horrible, horrible disease and even though it eventually took his life he NEVER
let it beat him because he lived his last months with happiness as he truly accepted and
learned the best of what life had to offer in such a short and detrimental time

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brownsugar says:

Glad Nick and his family had the privacy they needed, that Nick didn't pass away under media spotlight.. It is said tomorrow isn't promised to no man... However Nick was atleast able to keep some of his promises to his loved ones thru meticulous preparation... beautifully written article.