

Faith, determination & love credited in remarkable recovery of unstoppable teacher

Chris Zyp has been a drama teacher for more than 20 years, but even he wasn't prepared for this epic.

Suddenly struck with bacterial meningitis, Zyp was in a medically induced coma for weeks. He woke up to discover that both his legs and part of his right hand had been amputated. He spent months in hospital. He has had multiple skin grafts.

Despite the dramatic turn of events in his life, he hasn't lost the faith that helped him and his family through the last year or his sense of humour.

"I don't really use it as my opener 'Hi, how are you? I'm a meningitis survivor,'" Zyp joked.

He vividly remembers that day everything changed.

It was Feb. 28, 2016, when he and his wife, Trina Heron, were watching the Academy Awards – a tradition for the 45-year-old Edmonton teacher, actor and radio DJ. As they enjoyed the show together, the mild flu-like symptoms, shortness of breath and lack of appetite that Zyp had been feeling all day began to intensify.

"It was right after teachers' convention, so I was priming myself for the (school) show that we were about to mount, *Night of the Living Dead Live* – oddly enough, some people might say."

Later in the evening, Zyp's condition deteriorated to the point that his wife took him to the University of Alberta Hospital for examination. Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity as medical staff surrounded him.

To save his life, doctors intentionally placed him into a coma.

"They told me to count back from 100, and basically I started to count back from 100 and that's one of the last things I really solidly remember up until about six weeks later," Zyp said.

His meningitis is rare, and his complications are even more so.

To prevent his fingers from seizing, he faced months of therapy at the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital. However, Zyp's commitment and strength of spirit were so strong that the Glenrose named him to receive a Courage Award for

determination throughout his rehabilitation.

"He gave it 110 per cent every day. Oh, there were complaints, but he would still go ahead with it," said occupational therapist Dan Yeung, whom Zyp affectionately calls The Crippler. "Zyp said, 'You've got to do what you've got to do,' and there would be choice words peppered in that statement."

For Zyp, he never had a sense of bitterness, anger or self-pity. It was a matter of dealing with the situation at hand.

"I continually tried to deal with it the best possible way I could," he said.

"I hated where I was at sometimes, when I couldn't drink water at all, when I couldn't eat because I had a feeding tube. These were things that tortured me, when they had taken the skin off my back, and they had to roll me, when I was basically mummified."

At Holy Trinity High School in south Edmonton, where even his students simply call him "Zyp," news of their beloved drama teacher's situation was a shock, especially so close to the staging of their school play.

"One, what do we do? Our show is set to go up one week from the day he got sick, and oh my gosh, Zyp might die!" recalls Moia Calkins, a Grade 12 student.

"We were hearing bad news and bad news. We hadn't seen him, and he was still in his medically induced coma, so it was a really tough time because we hadn't heard from him."

Damian Lachacz, a Grade 11 student, was on a Quebec trip when he heard about his teacher's illness and prayed at the shrine of Sainte Anne de Beaupré, the patron saint of the sick and suffering.

"I went to this church thinking of Zyp and I prayed for his recovery. I made sure I wouldn't leave anything behind. I left it to Ste. Anne's intercession."

By the end of March, Zyp was back in the classroom and a few months later, he was back hosting his radio show on CJSR. He said prayer, his own faith, and the love of his wife Trina and his family continues to sustain him.

"The amount of prayer circles, the amount of group prayers, the amount of positivity that they sent my way, it helped me recover," Zyp said. "And not in the way that it saved me from the brink of death. But more in this way of that kind of outpouring of love and caring."

"I think that you have to believe that it can help affect you."

Moia Calkins vividly recalls the day her beloved teacher was back in the

classroom. Like the receiving line at a wedding reception, students stood waiting to welcome Zyp back.

“I asked my chem teacher – I’m like, ‘Zyp’s here, can we skip class to go and see him?’ She said, ‘Get out of here,’ ” Calkins remembers. “It was incredibly emotional. I got teared up. He got teared up. Everyone in the room was, like, waterworks.”

“When he came back, it’s like he never left. It was business as usual almost,” adds Damian Lachacz. “He’s impenetrable. He never backs down. He’s got such a strong spirit. He knows how to break the tension with humour, and that’s the perfect way to comfort someone.”

Returning to the classroom was just as emotional for Zyp himself.

“Seeing kids do amazing work, and just kind of realizing how lucky I am to be back in this position, I felt like ... I don’t know exactly what it is ... I may have been down, but I never felt like I was going to be out.”

Zyp said he’s proud of his accomplishments, but he realizes he has “much further to go.” He’s come to terms with the fact that life will be different for him and his family. He has two prosthetic legs. He faces more surgeries and therapy. But he hasn’t run out of goals.

“I’m not done yet by any means. The dream is to run at some point. Right now it’s not possible, but it is possible. Other people do it, right?”