

One year later, still #StuStrong

Alumnus Stuntman Stu Schwartz reflects on his journey fighting leukemia

REBECCA ATKINSON

A group of radio broadcasting students popped their heads up from their laptops when (Stuntman) Stu Schwartz wandered into the CKDJ radio studio at Algonquin for an unplanned visit in November 2016.

"This station hasn't really changed much in all the years," said Schwartz, as he looked around the studio he once roamed as a radio broadcasting student two decades earlier.

Although the studio has hardly changed, Schwartz undoubtedly has.

Where he would usually shake hands with new acquaintances, Schwartz exchanged fist bumps with the students. An effort to preserve his health, fist bumps are a new, careful habit he has adopted after a recent life-changing journey.

Schwartz, announcer of the Ottawa Senators and a prominent voice on *Majic 100's* morning radio show, is not the same sick man who appeared in a video he released in February 2016.

Today when you hear his steady voice booming through the Canadian Tire Centre, you don't see the rosy cheeks that once lost their colour. Nor do you see a body that has been through unimaginable change.

Having shown up on the Facebook newsfeeds of thousands, the video revealed the usually-spirited 42-year-old releasing a message with an uncharacteristically grim look about him.

Leukemia.

It was a single word that pulled on the hearts of those who watched. Not long before he had posted the video, Schwartz had been diagnosed with the cancer that attacks the bloodstream and bone marrow of those infected.

Now, one full year and an intense bone marrow transplant later, he is in remission and gradually recovering from what he considers to have been a "roller coaster."

An experience like this would greatly affect anyone, and Schwartz's journey with leukemia has truly changed him.

Today, his cheeks are glowing and small tufts of hair sit atop his head that used to be full of wavy locks.

But it has been a long, arduous road that is not yet over.

Schwartz's radio colleague and close friend, Angie Poirier, said that during his fight against leukemia, he resembled an elderly man with pale skin and little energy.

"It didn't even look like him anymore," she said. Poirier, who has known Schwartz for 20 years, said his appearance changed drastically over the last several months.

But his signature rosy cheeks were one of the first things Poirier noticed when she saw him after his successful bone marrow transplant.

"He always hated his red cheeks," she said, with a laugh. Upon seeing her friend, Poirier had happily remarked that the colour in his cheeks had returned.

Along with his pigment coming back, Schwartz's immune system is retraining itself. Like a newborn, he had to receive vaccinations and now takes extra precautions to avoid getting sick.

And while many have remarked that he is now looking better, Schwartz said he wishes they could know how he feels.

"Looks and how you feel are two different things," he said. "But I'm on the road to recovery and every day is a new day."

Along with his new immune system, Schwartz is learning how to better manage his time. "Right now, I just hate wasting time because I know how precious it is," he said. "And I know what I could be doing with that time."

A tighter schedule has been an adjustment for him, as he was used to living a hectic life.

With a formerly loaded schedule of morning radio and hockey-announcing evenings, Schwartz found he had burnt himself out.

Right now, I just hate wasting time because I know how precious it is

Stu Schwartz
PA announcer,
Ottawa Senators

He now realizes the importance of taking care of himself. Schwartz noted that his two children had sacrificed a lot due to their dad's busy life.

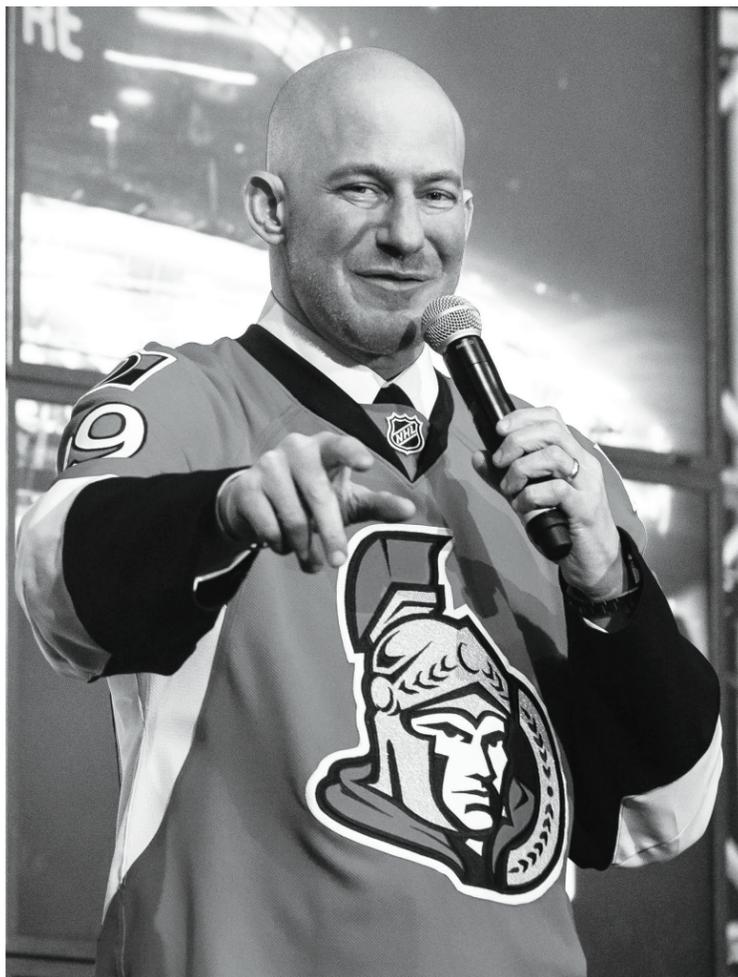
"The dad they had before was constantly out, hosting stuff. I want to give them that time back, so they can continue to drive me nuts," Schwartz said, with a laugh. Although his sickness was hard on his family, Schwartz said his wife and kids have been a strong team for him at home.

"You don't just wake up one day and go into remission," he said. "Without family, I don't know how I would've done it."

Since returning to his position at the rink, Schwartz has found he appreciates his job even more than he used to.

"When you have something that you love that's taken away from you with an illness, it really puts things into perspective," he said. Although he has returned to the arena, Schwartz has not yet gone back to his morning radio show.

The doctors told him it could take



COURTESY OF © 2017 FREESTYLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Stu Schwartz speaks at the Sens Gala in January 2017. The cancer survivor connects with many people who have fought similar battles to his own.

up to a year after his bone marrow transplant before his body will start feeling like its old self again. Schwartz is glad to be working again, but he knows he must take time to heal.

He often finds himself exhausted before the end of hockey games and has had to miss the occasional game, which is something he had never done in previous years of announcing games.

"If I can convince the Senators to do their games in the mornings, it would really help," Schwartz said, with a chuckle.

His body is gradually healing after many difficulties.

But it was the weeks of physical symptoms that had initially led to his diagnosis.

He remembers enduring long-lasting nose bleeds, intense migraines and little energy.

From the time when his symptoms had become apparent, Poirier, along with Schwartz's wife, told him to go see a doctor.

It wasn't until he saw blood in one of his eyes and bruising on his hands the morning of Feb. 15, 2016 that Schwartz checked himself in.

"I suspected something was up," he said.

Schwartz remembers fragments of what took place that night.

After six hours of blood tests and various procedures at the Civic Hospital, he was getting his jacket on when one of the doctors hurried over to him.

The doctor told him he had to start receiving blood transfusions

as soon as possible and they needed to transfer him to the General Hospital.

Shortly after, he was given his diagnosis.

"Little did I know that had I gone home that night," said Schwartz. "I likely would've died in my sleep."

Poirier, who had been receiving text updates from him all day, remembers her husband waking her up in the night to tell her the dreadful news.

"It was shocking, even with knowing he wasn't feeling well," she said. "My brain never went there."

When she returned to work the following day, Poirier had to face the listeners on her own, while Schwartz was in the hospital.

Little did I know that had I gone home that night, I likely would've died in my sleep

Stu Schwartz
PA announcer,
Ottawa Senators

"It was horrible," she said. "It was lonely and I was worried about him. I was on autopilot because everyday, I just couldn't believe it. It was like a bad dream."

In a texting conversation following the diagnosis, Poirier's husband encouraged Schwartz, telling him he was going to beat the illness because he is "#StuStrong."

Little did either of them realize

that this hashtag would eventually elicit thousands of dollars being donated to the Ottawa Hospital. #StuStrong became the name of a fundraising effort that has now collected more than \$270,000 for leukemia and stem cell research.

"The movement caught on like wildfire," said Poirier.

Schwartz, whose voice had long been known by many, then became a face that began to touch lives he didn't even know. Words of love and support flooded onto Schwartz's cellphone the night his life was altered – and the messages have yet to cease.

"I didn't realize when I opened up the floodgates that, my God, so many stories people have," he said.

He now connects with people in ways he never could have before his experience. People often ask him for advice in their similar situations. He emphasizes the importance of choosing to fight each day.

"Half of the battle is between your ears," he said.

"I don't have any words of wisdom. I just tell people this is not an easy journey. Just take it day by day."

Schwartz has been in and out of the hospital for months among his diagnosis, bone marrow transplant and remission.

He didn't enjoy being in the hospital and he remembers days of irritability on his part.

Poirier noted he was short-tempered in the early weeks of his diagnosis, but he is back to his jovial self.

Schwartz is widely known for his playful temperament, and his friends have noticed his old personality has returned.

Even so, when his colleague Alex Marchand, DJ for the Ottawa Senators, asked him if his outlook on life has changed, Schwartz answered him with a definite "yes."

As the changed man stood in the CKDJ radio studio at the college, he thought back on his journey.

Schwartz marvelled at how the years have passed since he meandered around the studio.

He motioned to a filing cabinet near the door of the studio, which is entirely covered in stickers. The stickers have been placed on the cabinet by radio broadcasting students over the years.

It was Schwartz's now-wife, Consuelo, who had placed the first sticker on the cabinet, back in 1995.

The sticker is more than a snapshot of the past. It remains from long ago, when his story first began.

Before his graduation, before the illness, before his life was changed.

"It's been a journey," said Schwartz. "And I'm happy to come back to where it all started."