

Christine Schwab | **EVERYDAY HEROES**

She feels their pain

Newport Beach woman lends a hand by taking to social media, encouraging kids and teens coping with rheumatoid arthritis.

Christine Schwab had met her dream man.

"We had this wonderful life," she recalls. "Everything was perfect."

But three months into her marriage, Schwab began experiencing shooting bolts of pain in her feet. She thought the cause was overdoing it on the treadmill. A foot massage should relieve it, she figured. But the next day, she couldn't wear heels.

Schwab went to an orthopedic surgeon but he couldn't settle on a diagnosis. She then went to a rheumatologist and explained the pain had extended from her feet to her knees. The rheumatologist recommended she visit Dr. Ken Kalunian at UCLA Medical Center.

After X-rays, blood tests and an examination of her feet and knees, Kalunian diagnosed her with early-stage rheumatoid arthritis. The doctor was glad he made a diagnosis and her husband, Shelly, was happy that the disease wasn't fatal.

But Schwab cried.

"I was so mad," she said.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks joints.

There is no cure for RA, but a number of medications can help ease symptoms, reduce inflammation and slow the disease's progression.

Schwab, a beauty and fashion reporter for television shows including "Live with Regis and Kathie Lee," "Oprah" and "Entertainment Tonight," thought the worst. Pictures of crippled people in wheelchairs at telethons flashed before her eyes.

"Wasn't that a disease for old people?" she, then 43, asked herself.

For years, Schwab kept her disease a secret.

"I remember wearing sneakers on 'Regis and Kathie Lee' and we were sitting on these bar stools and Kathie Lee looked at me and said, 'You have to be so confident to wear sneakers on television.'"

"I said, 'Don't you know these are the most popular things around?'"

On and off camera, Schwab juggled medications to ease the relentless pain. Her doctor prescribed steroids for instant relief. At one point, she gained 25 pounds. She asked her hairdresser for an angular cut to mask her puffy face.

Kalunian always would offer her hope each time they'd try a new medication. "Hope always battles any chronic disease," she said.

Schwab entered a research program at UCLA and was monitored every week. Since the doctors did not tell patients which medication they were on, Schwab figured she was on a half-dosage. "I felt really good and then my joints began acting



Christine Schwab holds the book that describes her battle with rheumatoid arthritis, "Take Me Home from the Oscars." She has a new cause, Christine's Kids, to raise awareness about juvenile rheumatoid arthritis.

MICHAEL GOULDING, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

up."

She thought of opting out of the study but she convinced herself that anything was possible. After nine months, she learned she was taking a placebo.

"That just tells you what attitude does," Schwab said.

But after receiving Enbrel, the arthritis went into remission. She takes a weekly injection and has not had severe pain since.

It had been 20 years since her diagnosis, when after doing research Schwab was alarmed to find out the disease also struck children.

"I never knew they were battling the same thing," she said.

Schwab decided to write a memoir about the ironic position she was in - being a fashion and beauty reporter for television shows all the while fighting and hiding an illness that threatened to ruin her life.

"It was two totally different worlds," she said.

After the book was published in 2011, Schwab began receiving messages from mothers on Facebook about their children's

struggles.

There were stories about babies not crawling, toddlers screaming and schoolkids who couldn't run on the playground.

"The kids took over," she said through tears. "The fashion was no longer important."

"I realize that the majority of the public doesn't know kids get arthritis, either," she said. Her goal is to create awareness and raise money for research.

"I use my voice for these kids because kids can't," she said.

Schwab's Facebook page, Christine's Kids, which has nearly 1,700 fans, is a place where children and parents can share photos and stories and keep the emphasis on hope and positivity.

"My message is about hope," she said. "I offer hope because hope is what my doctor gave me."

Schwab, 67, shares the importance of being aggressive in trying medications and communicating with doctors.

"I learned that I can share all those experiences with them," she said. "There's hope in those needles and in the medication

that they will be good."

As a board member of Long Beach-based Arthritis National Research Foundation, she is committed to raising funds for research into a cure for arthritis.

On April 21, Dr. Fraser Perkins, an anesthesiologist for 35 years and a friend of Schwab on her Facebook page, will run the Boston Marathon in support of the Arthritis National Research Foundation.

"I will be using my healthy joints to run for kids who aren't so fortunate," he wrote. "They fight every day for what most kids don't even think about - a normal childhood."

Says Schwab: "I feel like I'm making a difference."

Her husband is just as proud. "This is the most important work you've ever done," he said.

"These kids are so resilient," she said. "They're amazing with their stamina through these obstacles."

"The kids are the heroes."

CONTACT THE WRITER:
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Christine has always been a class act on camera and off. She shares her story with honesty and her signature style."

KATHIE LEE GIFFORD

Christine Schwab

Age: 67
Residence: Newport Beach
Favorite charity: Arthritis National Research Foundation
How you can help: Donate to Dr. Fraser Perkins' Fundraising Page "Racing for a Cure" at active.com/donate/Racing4ACure/Perkins.

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