

CHRISTOPHER REEVE DEAD AT 52
"SUPERMAN" ACTOR BECAME CHAMPION FOR
PARALYSIS RESEARCH
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Christopher Reeve, the "Superman" actor who showed the world Herculean bravery after a near-fatal spinal cord injury, died Sunday of heart failure. He was 52.

With his family at his side, Reeve fell into a coma Saturday after going into cardiac arrest at his New York home, said his publicist, Wesley Combs.

"On behalf of my entire family, I want to thank Northern Westchester Hospital for the excellent care they provided to my husband," his wife, Dana Reeve, said in a statement.

"I also want to thank his personal staff of nurses and aides, as well as the millions of fans from around the world who have supported and loved my husband over the years."

'This Can't Be My Life'

With an "S" emblazoned across his chiseled chest, Reeve became the most famous movie actor to take on the role of the comic book hero from planet Krypton, who could bend steel, repel bullets and fly through the air to save damsels in distress, occasionally taking them back to his crystal lair.

In the 1978 blockbuster and a series of sequels, Reeve epitomized the Ivory-soap goodness of a superhero. Then, in an equestrian competition in 1995, he was paralyzed from the neck down after he was thrown from his horse.

When Reeve realized he could not breathe without a respirator, he contemplated "pulling the plug," he admitted in an exclusive interview with ABC News' Barbara Walters just months after the tragedy.

"You look out the window, and you can't believe where you are," he said. "And the thought that keeps going through your mind is, 'This can't be my life. There's been a mistake.'"

But despair turned into determination, and Reeve's will to live prevailed. With the support of his wife, he became America's leading advocate for spinal cord injury research, raising money, writing books, testifying before Congress and giving motivational speeches all over the country.

Reeve Vows to 'Escape the Cape'

Born in Manhattan and raised in Princeton, N.J., Reeve wanted to be an actor all his life, and by the age of 16, had an agent and an Actors' Equity membership card.

At the Juilliard School for Drama in New York, he met his roommate and lifelong friend, Robin Williams.

In 1975, Reeve debuted on Broadway in the short-lived "A Matter of Gravity" with Katharine Hepburn, and soon got a small part in a nuclear submarine disaster movie "Gray Lady Down."

For his career to take off, however, Reeve had to put on a red cape. He told Walters that at first he thought the role was beneath him.

"I was sort of a snob about it," he said. "I thought it would be kind of hokey and I didn't quite get it that this guy is a cultural icon."

But the 6-foot-4-inch actor seized the opportunity, lifting weights to add 30 pounds of muscle for the screen test, wiping out 200 other wannabe Men of Steel.

While filming his most famous movie in London, Reeve met Gae Exton, a modeling agency executive with whom he had two children, Matthew, now 25, and Alexandra, now 21. He and Dana also had a son, Will, now 11.

An instant celebrity, Reeve was deluged with scripts, and the actor confounded fans with strange choices for movie parts, struggling not to be typecast in the role that made him famous, vowing to "escape the cape."

His first post-"Superman" film was the low-budget, poorly received "Somewhere in Time" with Jane Seymour and Christopher Plummer.

Several missed opportunities hampered his career. He turned down the role that eventually went to Richard Gere in "American Gigolo" and "chickened out" of doing "Body Heat." He went on to appear in "Deathtrap," "Noises Off, The Remains of the Day," "Speechless" and "Village of the Damned."

But Reeve could always count on "Superman" to garner attention for his career and went on to star in three more sequels, the last two considerably less successful than the first two.

Overcoming 'Absolute Freak' Accident

Everything changed on May 27, 1995. Reeve was at a competition in Virginia when his horse, Eastern Express, came to an inexplicable and abrupt halt before an easy, 3-foot jump.

Reeve's hands were tangled in the reins and he flew from the horse, landing on his head and smashing two vertebrae. If a bystander had not quickly opened his airway, he would have died instantly.

Reeve told Walters it was an "absolute freak" accident that could not have been prevented.

At first, doctors gave Reeve a 50 percent chance of survival. When he was still in shock and unsure if he would make it, Williams came into his hospital room in a blue scrub hat and yellow gown. "I'm a proctologist here to examine you," he said in a Russian accent, snapping his rubber gloves.

"For the first time after the accident, I laughed," Reeve said. "And with that, I knew I was going to be OK."

Always a jock, Reeve poured his gusto for sports into physical therapy — spending hours at a time in a swimming pool and state-of-the-art exercise equipment — in his determination to walk again.

In "Courageous Steps," a documentary that was released two years ago and directed by his son Matthew, the actor showed that through hard work he had regained slight movement in his right wrist, left-hand fingers and both legs.

The movie shows Reeve pedaling on a Functional Electrical Stimulation bicycle. The device has a computer that sends external electrical stimulation to his legs, much like the brain normally does, and that causes the muscles to fire and move the bike pedals.

"It was hair-raising to say the least," Matthew Reeve said of his father's willingness to share the details of his therapy with the world.

"Luckily he liked it. He only had sort of professional criticism, as a director. He was like, maybe that shot could be tighter."

Despite his physical limitations, Reeve continued to act and direct. He starred in a 1998 TV production of "Rear Window," an update of the 1954 Jimmy Stewart movie, which won Reeve a Screen Actors Guild award.

One of his many legacies is the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation, which has given out more than \$22 million for paralysis research. And in May 2002, he and his wife opened the Christopher and Dana Reeve Paralysis Resource Center, a center devoted to teaching paralyzed people to live more independently.

As he promoted "Courageous Steps," Reeve's determination seemed as strong as ever. "I refuse to allow a disability to determine how I live my life," he said. "I don't mean to be reckless, but setting a goal that seems a bit daunting actually is very helpful toward recovery."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did Christopher Reeve epitomize *both* types of heroes (larger-than-life heroes and everyday heroes)?
- How could an everyday hero like Reeve be even more inspiring than Superman?