

Zack Werner is best known as a judge on the popular Canadian Idol TV show, where each season he dishes out brutal yet honest advice to young singing hopefuls. Yet despite his bad boy persona, the president of Toronto-based Venus Management and Venus Records does have a hidden softer side.

No idol chatter:

Zack Werner on his father's battle with ALS

By Chris Noone

The popular Canadian celebrity is involved with many charities, most notably the ALS Society of Canada. *Solutions* editor Chris Noone caught up with the Winnipeg native to talk about Werner's volunteer work and his late father's battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Q Your father, Leonard Werner, was diagnosed with ALS at age 61 and passed away a year later. Tell me about him.

My dad was a prominent businessman in Winnipeg who ran the family business called Dominion Soudak Fur Auction Sales. At one time, he was president of the Fur Council of Canada. In spite of his busy work schedule, he was a devoted family man who always had time for my brother and sister and me as well as for the community.

He was conscious of his health and worked very hard to be in shape. He had quit smoking in his 40s, had lost weight, and was running and doing everything he could in order to live a long, healthy life. Then he was diagnosed with ALS.

Q How did the family react to the diagnosis?

There was a big learning curve. With any serious diagnosis, at first a person always wants to assume the best case scenario. But with ALS, there really isn't one. Our family adopted a "stiff upper lip" and figured we would find

ways to get around the disease as best we could. Unfortunately, in my father's case, this was impossible.

Q How did the disease affect your father?

He was over six feet tall and about 230 pounds, so he was always defined by most people by his physical presence as well as his intellectual presence. The effects of the disease was the last thing we expected: we never thought someone in such great shape would have all of their strength waste away in only a year. It was very shocking.

The disease is incredibly humbling—and de-humanizing, if you allow it to be. It's very difficult to watch a loved one lose their mobility, their strength, and then their ability to breathe and swallow. Our family just coped through that year, and then he passed away. It was difficult for everybody.

Q Who cared for your father while he was ill?

He had a great medical team, and as with most ALS patients, his care very quickly came down to his relationship with his respirologist. He was at home through most of his entire illness, and my mom took care of everything.

My wife and I just had our first child and spent every weekend we could flying back and forth to Winnipeg to be with my mom and dad.



Q What kind of relationship did you have with your father?

After he passed away, I would hear his voice in my head all the time and realize how much I missed him and how difficult it was to go on making decisions and feeling comfortable without having the opportunity to run things by him.

He meant a lot to me. I wasn't an easy kid, and he was a very demanding guy. It was all meant in love, but through my teen years and early 20s, it was hard to deal with. I think most fathers and sons go through these periods. I think we were cut too closely from the same cloth, though he took life much more seriously and more responsibly than I have ever been able to.



Q Since 2006, you've been the National Chair for the Walk for ALS. Why did you get involved with The ALS Society of Canada?

I attended the ALS Walk in the town where my family and I live in southeastern Ontario. There, I met a man in his late 30s who had ALS. I saw him and his family and the circumstances they were in. It just touched me. Seeing this man struggling to be part of the community reminded me of how critically important this event is.

In the 10 years since my father's death, there has been no definitive progress in the control of this disease. But to come together for an event like this really provides people with a sense of empowerment as well as hope for the future.

I have seen first-hand what this disease does, and we must find a cure.

Q What message would you give to families living with ALS?

People living with the disease are still alive. They are still part of the community and deserve all the care and attention they can get, to make their lives as fully functional as possible.

Q Staying healthy is an important part of your life. How do you stay fit with your busy schedule?

Physically, I run, golf and play hockey regularly, so I like to keep busy. I try to be moderate, but it is against my nature. Mentally, I'm focusing on being happy and less stressed. Fortunately, my kids help with that.

On the road, I avoid carbohydrates and fat whenever possible, and I remind myself that I'm travelling to work, not to play. The keys for me are being disciplined enough to get enough sleep and to keep my alcohol consumption to a minimum. I try and run when I can and not procrastinate about it. Running is good for my heart and my mind.

Q What are your thoughts on getting older?

Time seems to just disappear, but I'm learning to deal with it. The joy of watching my kids grow up is great, and all in all I feel very young and healthy. I freely admit I hate my birthday, but so far so good. It really isn't aging that bothers me anymore but the fear of losing my health too early.

Q You've accomplished quite a bit in the music industry. What are your plans for the future?

Right now, I am focused on finding new challenges and rediscovering old ones. One thing I am doing now is getting back to writing and recording my own music. I think it's important for me to get back to the reasons I ended up devoting my life to music in the first place. After all, the show will—and must—go on. ●

“You know you're old when you're told to slow down by the doctor and not the police.”

Anonymous

