

CHRISTOPHER REEVE'S RECENT AUSTRALIAN VISIT HIGHLIGHTED THE ACTOR'S AMAZING COURAGE AND RESILIENCE. BUT BEHIND THE BOLD FRONT IS AN EVEN STRONGER WILL – THAT OF HIS WIFE, DANA.

**F**aster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!

Why, it's Superman, of course. When the quartet of *Superman* movies came out between 1978 and 1987, the super hero found his most perfect embodiment in the meltingly handsome actor named Christopher Reeve.

Self-deprecatingly shy and clumsy as Superman's newspaperman alter ego, Clark Kent, mesmerisingly physical as the daredevil Superman, Christopher instantly became one of the most recognisable and popular faces in Hollywood.

Yet when Christopher, always a passionate, fit sportsman, was riding his horse Eastern Express in a professional event on May 27, 1995, the unimaginable happened. His thoroughbred balked at a one-metre jump, and as Christopher pitched forward, his hands became tangled in the bridle. All the weight of his athletic 98kg, 198cm-tall frame landed square on his head, fracturing the uppermost vertebrae, which left him paralysed and unable to breathe. Only the swiftest and most expert medical attention saved him from certain death.

When he awoke from his coma to find himself transformed from movie star and action man to being dependent on a wheelchair and breathing ventilator, his life as he'd known it was gone forever.

His new life – and true calling, as it turns out – was just beginning. And it was the start of a new life for his family as well.

Christopher, now 50, lives in a large yet cosy home, with the ground floor remodelled to make it

wheelchair-accessible, an hour north of New York City, with his actress wife, Dana, 41, and their 10-year-old son, Will, born before the accident. His other son, Matthew, 24, and daughter, Alexandra, 19, from his previous relationship with model agent Gae Exton, are frequent visitors.

As one of Christopher's aides adjusts his head rest (he requires round-the-clock nursing care, which means a house constantly full of people), the ravishingly beautiful Alexandra, home on a visit from Yale University, holds up a cup of tea from which he sips through a straw while looking out over fields covered with snow, where his white Labrador is frolicking.

The ventilator that keeps him breathing makes soft rhythmic hisses. Dana, slim and lovely in a crisp white shirt and supple suede trousers, comes in to say hello.

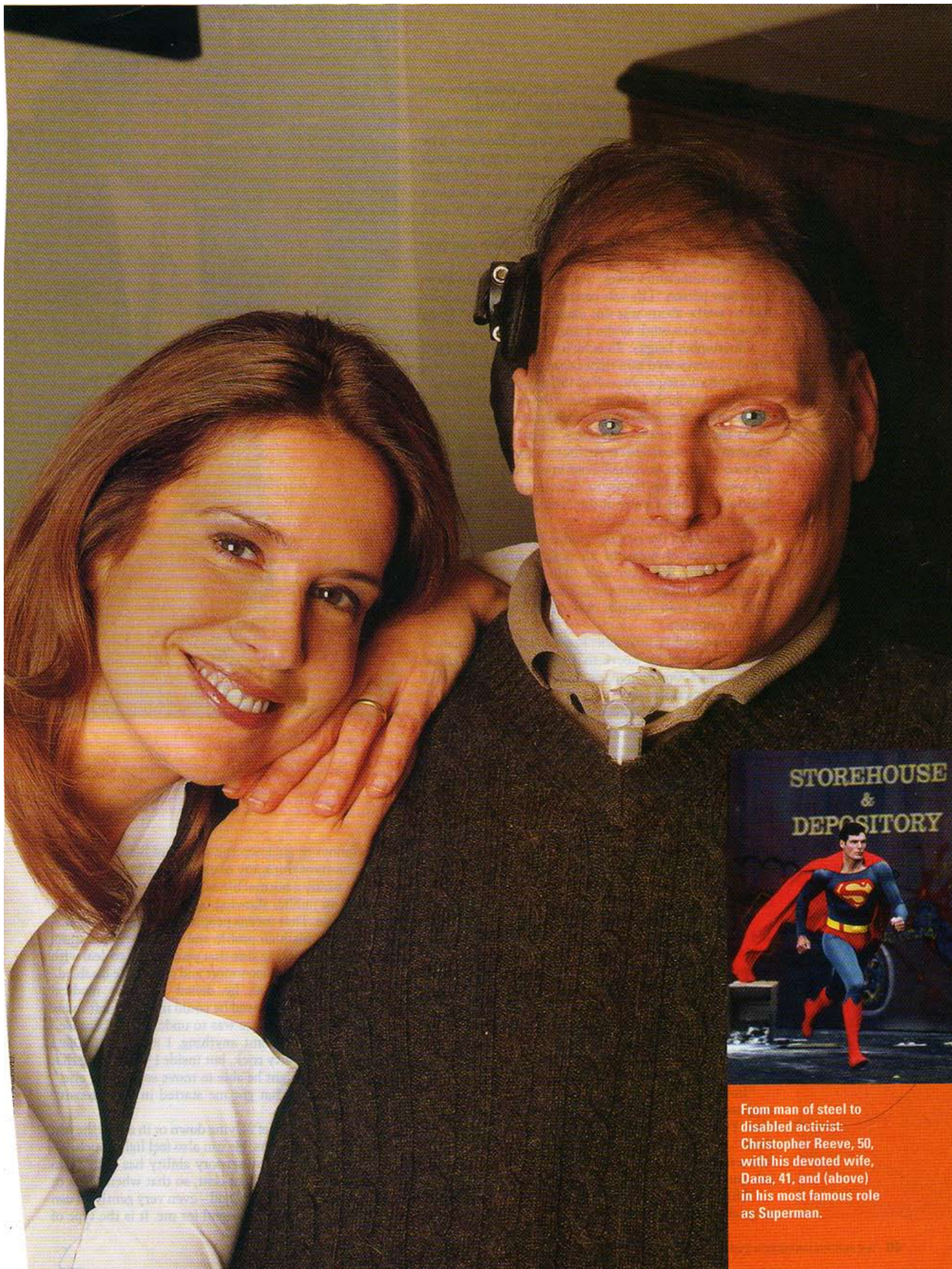
"It's amazing we found each other," she says as she gives Christopher a fond smile. "As personalities we tend to be loners, so we instinctively know about giving each other space. Obviously, the accident meant a huge adjustment, but now it's almost as if I don't remember any other way. The people we have here to help Chris are so incredible and add so much to our lives. They, too, have an instinctive sense of when to be around or not."

"Even when I was in intensive care for 30 days right after the accident, trying to come to grips with being paralysed, there were doctors and nurses I was happy to see and others not," Christopher adds.

"Over the years, the people who work with me have all become very close. They're like an extended family. So it's not an invasion – it's inclusive."

Even with such radical shifts in their personal ►

# Superman's superwoman



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From man of steel to disabled activist: Christopher Reeve, 50, with his devoted wife, Dana, 41, and (above) in his most famous role as Superman.

lives, what's most impressive about Christopher and Dana is their positive attitude and good humour.

"It's the only way to get through life," says Dana. "Otherwise you'd be crying all the time. I thought I'd be crying when I turned 40. I used to lie about my age until I had the big birthday. And then I thought, oh well, forget about it. I anticipated being unhappy, but now I'm like a newborn in her 40s. But maybe when I'm 46 I'll start lying again!"

"It'll be nice for people to be shocked when you stop lying," Christopher teases.

"Chris sometimes jokes: 'I sort of liked it when I was a shallow person.' Life was certainly easier when all we had to worry about was our audition schedule," Dana counters with a wink as she kisses him gently.

Christopher laughs. Then he laughs again when I tell him I'd interviewed him right before his accident, when he was promoting a film called *Village of the Damned*.

"That was such a cheesy film," he says. "But it was deliberately cheesy. No one seemed to get that."

At the time of this interview, Christopher was just about to make a rare visit to Australia to speak at the NSW Premier's Forum on Spinal Cord Injury and Conditions. He was also Down Under to raise funds for the Spinal Injuries Research Centre at the Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute in Sydney.

"Christopher Reeve's experience, bravery and passion are a symbol of hope for all people with paralysis," NSW Premier Bob Carr said. "He is on a mission to bring about change not just for himself but for all people with spinal cord injuries and other central nervous system disorders."

The non-profit Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation (CRPF), founded by Reeve in 1999, has already raised a staggering \$50million in research grants for the world's best neuroscientists.

In addition, through its Quality of Life Grants



## **"Shortly after his accident, Dana knelt by his bedside and said these simple yet profound words: 'You're still you, and I love you.'"**

program, CRPF has awarded more than \$2.5million in grants to organisations that help people with disabilities live more independently, in a manner that is dictated by their abilities, not their disability.

"I always meant to go to Australia before my accident, and wish I had," Christopher says. "My stepfather was stationed in Darwin in the signal corps during World War II, and I grew up hearing about it. Plus I have many Australian friends, so this trip is long overdue."

Meeting Christopher this time is a little discomfiting because he's in the grip of a bout of alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that causes hair to fall out, and he's not looking his usual self. His lashes, eyebrows and much of his thick hair are temporarily gone.

"Ironically, I'm having a reaction to the drug that's supposed to keep my hair from falling out," he explains, "but I've decided to not wear a wig or a hat all the time ... to let people see me looking emphatically not like a movie star. This way they are more compelled to ask questions."

"I find it satisfying to take every possible opportunity to go about my life as I am, whether to a local movie or

out to dinner or go down the streets of New York. The most important thing any of us who are disabled can do is lead as nearly a normal life as possible, and that means going out in public, showing up in places where we're entitled to be. That means people have to deal with it."

Thanks to his high profile and sheer determination, Christopher is making sure that people have to deal with "it" – namely, their discomfort and fear of the disabled.

In September 2000, he defied his poor medical prognosis when he showed he could move his left index finger. "My first response was to underplay it because I didn't know if it meant anything. I joked with Dana about it being a party trick, but inside I was hoping that it meant that I might be able to move something else," he says. "That's what got me started in the intensive exercise program."

Now, if Christopher is lying down or in a pool, he can move his legs and arms. He can also feel light touch.

"Over the years, my sensory ability has gone from about 12 per cent to 70 per cent, so that when Dana or Will places a hand on my hand – even very gently – I can feel it. That is very meaningful for me. It is the type of

Above right: Christopher, then 43, Dana, 33, in 1995, only weeks before the accident that changed their lives.



achievement that gives all paralysed people hope."

Such thoughts were far from the young Christopher Reeve's mind as he grew up a child of privilege with his brother, Benjamin, and his step-siblings – Brock, Mark, and Alison. His father, Franklin, was a university English professor, and his mother, Barbara, was a journalist. They divorced when Chris was four, in 1956.

Christopher was already becoming a gifted young sportsman, however. By the time he was three, he could ski, then later learned to swim, sail, play tennis and ride horses. He also developed an abiding interest in the theatre. He did summer workshops and attended theatre festivals and, after graduating from Cornell University in 1974, began studying at Juilliard, New York's leading academy of performing arts, where his roommate was the comic star Robin Williams.

Christopher decided to drop out, though, when he was offered a regular role on a daytime soap, *Love of Life*, in 1974, but fulfilled every young actor's dream when he made his Broadway debut opposite legend Katharine Hepburn in *A Matter of Gravity*, in 1976. Two years later, the young unknown was picked from 200 others to become Superman.

Throughout his career, Christopher was determined to prove that he was more than just the handsome hunk and hero of four *Superman* films. He made eclectic decisions when choosing roles and appeared in such

films as *Somewhere in Time* with Jane Seymour, *Deathtrap* opposite Michael Caine, *The Bostonians* with Vanessa Redgrave, *Street Smart* with Morgan Freeman, *Noises Off* with Michael Caine and Carol Burnett, and the Oscar-nominated *The Remains of the Day* with Anthony Hopkins, to name a few.

However, he always returned to his first love, the theatre, in plays such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Fifth of July*, *My Life*, *Summer and Smoke*, *Love Letters* and *The Aspern Papers*.

During those heady days, he never thought an opening night would soon become a distant memory.

He had plenty of time to think during his initial six months in rehabilitation. Certainly, there were dark moments of despair, but Christopher was constantly lifted out of them by Dana's enduring devotion. Shortly after his accident, Dana knelt by his bedside and said these simple words: "You're still you, and I love you."

"We're a team," she tells me after Christopher has wheeled himself down the hall and into the room (using his breath to propel the wheelchair) for the photo shoot. "We'd been together for five years before the accident, so we'd been through the romantic thing and were ready to make a vow to one another. It really was you and me against the world." She smiles at Christopher.

"Obviously, this is not something I could have predicted or would have wanted to happen, yet I know ►

Christopher today, at his cosy home outside New York City. He has "an extended family" of nursing staff 24 hours a day.



what I bargained for – I bargained for him! And as much as this is something I don't want him to go through, there was never any question that we were not going to go through it together."

Dana has had to make some tremendous shifts in her own life, but she talks about them with such sanguine matter-of-factness that it is truly awe-inspiring, especially when she discusses children.

"We were trying [to have a child] when Chris had the accident. And it is possible, even now," Dana says. After consulting fertility specialists, they learned that sperm can be harvested surgically and then inserted into an egg with IVF.

"But we decided against it. We knew we had to reconstruct a family life that was joyful and where the kids got enough attention, because whenever you live with someone who has a disability, the attention, by necessity, goes to that person.

"Also Chris really felt that he would be tremendously saddened if he couldn't hold the baby and, in any case, with all three of his children he had plenty of diaper experience," she adds, laughing.



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For her part, Dana, remembering Will's early years fondly, also hasn't forgotten how much work it is looking after a baby. "Although I don't do the physical care for Chris any more on a daily basis, I am involved. I drive the van a lot when we go places and we can't just stop and hop out the door."

With a baby in tow, Dana says, things could get even more complicated. "Let's say that the van's lift for the wheelchair broke and I had to pump it manually. That would be fine. But if there was also a crying baby there, I would probably just flip out!"

She has resolutely refused to give in to anger and neither has Christopher, although at times he has been understandably seething inside at the limitations of his physical helplessness. Instead, he has focused on his charitable foundation and his film work.

He directed his first film, *In the Gloaming*, starring close friend Glenn Close. It aired on cable television in the US in April 1997, and won six Cable Ace Awards, including Best Dramatic Special and Best Director.

He wrote an autobiography, *Still Me*, an immediate best-seller when published in April 1998, and his audio recording of it earned him a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album in 1999.

And, in his first leading role since becoming paralysed, Christopher starred in an updated version of the classic Hitchcock thriller, *Rear Window*, in 1999, for which he won the Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Actor in a Television Movie or Miniseries.

"What I want to do in terms of acting is in the vein of *Rear Window*," he tells me. "In the original, the

Jimmy Stewart character only had to deal with a broken leg. I wanted to raise the stakes, showcase computer technology and what wheelchairs can do, and cast a disabled person as a hero. Very often in movies and TV the person with a disability is either the villain or someone who is very angry and disturbed. I wanted to play a disabled character who uses his brains and resources to be a hero."

Computer technology is the pivot of Christopher's rehabilitation program. Electrical pulses placed on his muscles send jolts that stimulate and strengthen them. These pulses also move his limbs, assisting him on a bicycle or in the aqua-therapy pool. They also get his heart rate up and strengthen his cardio-vascular system, which is crucial for maintaining his optimal health.

Now, Christopher is strong enough to work in his wheelchair on a film set for 12 to 14 hours non-stop. Before, when he was only beginning to exercise, he was vulnerable to life-threatening illnesses such as pneumonia, collapsed lungs, ulcers, bacterial infections, blood clots, blood pressure disorders, skin breakdown – all directly caused by immobilisation. He was constantly spending time in the hospital.

Still, he keeps working, not only because he wants to, but because he has to. Christopher is fortunate in having – for the moment, anyway – adequate financial resources to fund much of his own care. Yet few other patients with such severe injuries could afford it.

"The financial drain of an injury like this is huge and unrelenting, and we're zooming through the savings as it is. It's a huge hunk of money every year," Dana

Above left: Christopher with son Matthew, 23, and daughter Alexandra, 18, in 2001, at a CRPF function. Right: With Dana and son Will, 9, in 2002, at a charity night.





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says, who because of this has to work herself. Yet she had to turn down a lucrative starring role in the hit Broadway musical, *The Full Monty*, because it would have meant a six-month stint in San Diego – 4800km away from Christopher. “It was a goal of mine to originate a role in the musical theatre. If circumstances had been different I would have done it,” she says philosophically.

One of Christopher’s major goals is to help change the way US medical insurance companies treat paralysed clients. He owes his good health now to his rigorous exercise routine, yet his medical care coverage will not pay for it. (The insurance company’s philosophy is that Christopher is the exception and that because other disabled people are not going to get better, why should they pay for something that isn’t going to help?)

Not only does Christopher believe it would be cost-effective for insurance companies to be pro-active, but “it’s also morally the right thing to do. At the very least, it’s pretty obvious it will optimise a patient’s health. Even a little bit each day,” he says. “For five years, knock on wood, I haven’t needed to be hospitalised or had any serious medical issues. My progress, especially the aqua-therapy in the pool, which I love, continues.”

He takes a deep breath and sighs. “While I’m glad that I have had this success, it won’t mean anything unless it translates into pro-active therapy for other patients. I don’t want to be dismissed as a freak case of one person with tremendous improvement. That is statistically meaningless to scientists.”

“And another question to ask is whether rehabilitation is about giving people a chance for a better quality of life or whether it’s only about maintaining the quality of life they have? Thankfully, we’re seeing now a radical shift in the philosophy of rehabilitation.”

Another even more controversial issue is that of stem cell research. “There are three types of stem cells,” Christopher explains. “Adult stem cells already have a job to do in the body, and can be used to cure bone marrow cancer or sickle cell anaemia, but they can’t cure paralysis. Embryonic stem cells, taken from fertilised embryos from fertility clinics, which otherwise would

have been discarded as medical waste, can become any tissue or cell type in the body, but they can cause terrible side effects.”

“And then there are stem cells derived from an unfertilised egg. The egg’s nucleus is removed and the patient’s DNA, taken from a swab inside the mouth, is put inside. Before that little cluster of cells becomes anything resembling a human being, the stem cells, which are a genetic match to the patient, are usable.”

He sighs. “Controversy comes because some opponents claim that the moment an unfertilised egg, even in a laboratory Petri dish, has a person’s DNA put into it, it’s a human being. It could be implanted in the womb; that is cloning. But these stem cells have the best chance of working – and with the fewest side effects – because they are an exact DNA match.” He sighs again.

“The goal in America is to ban and criminalise any attempt to clone a human, while legitimising therapeutic cloning. The problem is people automatically freak – they don’t know enough to make the distinction between human cloning and therapeutic cloning.”

(In December 2002, the Australian Senate passed legislation regulating embryonic stem cell research, along with a bill banning human cloning. This allows scientists to work with existing embryonic stem cell lines and with surplus in vitro fertilisation embryos created before April 5, 2002. “This legislation will allow stem cell research to go forward on a sound ethical basis,” says Martin Pera, a cell biologist with Monash University, Melbourne.)

If work with stem cells, which can help regenerate nerves, continues, there is every likelihood Christopher will be mobile again. “I will be walking,” he insists.

His hopefulness helps all those who are paralysed, but Dana’s hopes centre on her family. “My hopes are really pinned on Will, for him to be healthy and happy; that’s what Chris and I talk about most,” she explains.

“I think more about stability than improvement. I want us all to be healthy and Will to be able to pursue his dreams. He’s had a lot of lessons about life and loss at an early age. He’s also learned that despite the physical disabilities, his father is still a force to be respected.”

“Actually, I don’t have specific hopes about Chris’s movement, as he does,” she goes on. “From the family’s viewpoint, it lifts his spirits, so it’s more for his emotional wellbeing. He really wants movement back and with Will being such a terrific athlete, it’s terribly hard for Chris not to be able to do stuff with him. I don’t necessarily need Christopher walking and moving for me. I’ll take whatever comes.”

Christopher Reeve may no longer be mesmerisingly physical. Yet he is truly remarkable. His determination is faster than a speeding bullet. His courage is more powerful than a locomotive. And the perseverance he has reveals that he is able to leap more than tall buildings in a single bound.

It gives him the legs of a giant.

— KAREN MOLINE

Top: Christopher and Dana with actors Susan Sarandon and Robin Williams at an October 1995 Spotlight Awards dinner.

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