

# On the Chopping Block



**Imagine whipping up a gourmet, cheeto-crusted turkey entrée dish in 30 minutes... in front of superstar chefs Scott Conant, Alex Guarnaschelli and Marc Murphy.**

While most of us will only experience this scenario in our dreams, Chef Chris Holland found himself in this position once again when he returned to the [Food Network's Chopped](#) kitchen and **won for the third time**.

This time, he competed for the chance to win the \$10,000 grand prize for the National MS Society on last night's episode of Chopped. Why?

Because Chris lives with MS.

We caught up with Chris to talk about his journey with MS, career and why he went back for a third time on the famed TV show.

## **When were you diagnosed with MS and what was that like?**

In 2004, at 24 years of age, I woke up one morning, and I was numb from the waist down and found it difficult to stand up. Subsequent testing led to the discovery that the vision in my left eye was impaired. Seven days later, I was diagnosed with MS.



Chris with his wife Marge and son Max

### **What was your reaction?**

I asked my doctor, “Is that the disease that makes you paralyzed?” That was the extent of my knowledge about the disease.

It’s strange being given life altering news. You would think that the normal reaction would be to grieve with loved ones. For me, it was not that way. I chose isolation and denial. Logically, I knew that I was sick, but I didn’t want to let myself acknowledge it. I could and did everything in my power to forget that I had this disease. I didn’t want to learn about it, I didn’t want to go on medicine or go to counseling; I just wanted to forget.

It was this need to forget that would begin the darkest chapter of my life. I felt that my future had been taken away from me. Hopes and dreams had become pointless and “caring” about my life was pointless, too. At 24 years of age, I felt as if I had nothing to live for, and that shaped how I would come to act in the coming years

I eventually found escape through the use of drugs, and for 5 years, I lived to forget. Living that way brought me pain that I could never imagine. I lost almost everything in the world that I cherished... friends, family, my career (I was in the legal profession at the time). Funny thing is, I lost everything in my life except the one thing that I really wanted to lose: the MS.

### **How has MS affected your life? Your career?**

In 2009, I got sober and began to put my life back together piece by piece. In getting sober, I learned the importance of acceptance. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and took stock of my present life.

Ironically, it was the MS that inspired me to pursue my dream of becoming a chef. I remember coming home from my office job and telling my wife that I wanted to try and be a chef. I wanted to have a career that I loved. I wanted to be happy. With her blessing and full

support, I jumped into an entirely new career at age 32.



Chris cooking with his dad Tom early in Chris' career

Honestly, I don't think that I would have had the perspective on life and happiness had it not been for the diagnosis and subsequent tribulations that I faced. At the end of the day, every person on this earth is living a life with an expiration date. In that way, they are no different than people with MS. The difference is that for those of us with MS, we get reminded of it every day. If looked at with the right perspective, that can be a blessing.

As far as my career currently, MS does add a bit more challenge to an already physically demanding job. The fatigue is very real, and a 12-hour day becomes that much harder when you add MS related-fatigue to it. I am fortunate, though, to work for one of the kindest and most compassionate men that I have ever known. Being open in this business about a condition that could, at any given time, put me out of commission for an extended period of time, is something that always scared me. I was able to do that because I knew that my boss and friend, Joe Printz, absolutely had my back.

### **Why did you select the National MS Society as your charity to compete for on Chopped?**

I am a private person, but the "Chopped" producers are great at their jobs. Eventually they got me to open up about living with MS. Being on "Chopped" was a dream come true, and cooking for Alton Brown made it that much more surreal.

What I didn't expect, and what affected me in ways that I could never imagine, was the response that I received after the episode aired. I was able to connect with so many others who had been diagnosed, many young people who were in the same place that I was at 24 – feeling hopeless and defeated. It warmed my heart to hear that my story brought some hope to people who had their lives turned upside down. When "Chopped" asked me to come back and compete again, I wanted to represent all of us who live every day with the uncertainty that this disease brings; to show them that there is living left to do after the diagnosis, and not to give up on their dreams.



Chris' Walk MS team

### **What would you like people to know about living with MS?**

If you have a friend or loved one who lives with this disease, please understand that everything we do takes more effort than it would for a normal person. We are tired a lot and it's not because we go to bed too late or had too much to drink. We live with aches and pains all the time, and no we aren't being overly dramatic for attention, in fact we are most likely understating our discomfort. Most importantly, people with MS are not weak; we are some of the strongest people you will ever meet. Just coming across as "normal" takes an extraordinary strength of will.

We don't want sympathy from anyone, just a bit of understanding and patience. Thanks to organizations like the Society, this is becoming less and less of an issue though.