

Her smile is radiating. Her enthusiasm infectious. Despite limited scleroderma, Elaine Schwager is healthy today and approaches each day with the following maxim

Live in the Moment

By Jeff Shmase

The first thing that hits you is her smile. The wide grin coming from the mouth of 35-year-old Elaine Schwager is genuine. At 5'3½", fit and with long blond hair, there is very little evidence that she lives with a chronic illness, save for her hands. On a recent spring day with mostly sunny skies and the temperature hovering above 60 degrees, Schwager is wearing gloves along with her Merrimack College softball coaching apparel.

The business at hand is a doubleheader—games the struggling squad needs to win to gain entry into the conference's post-season tourney. For the head coach of this Division 2, North Andover, Mass. college, the focus is on today—she will be concerned with tomorrow the next day.

The headline of this story is taken as inspiration from the song performed by country music star Tim McGraw, "Live Like You Were Dying." The song is about a person who has received some bad medical news, and his plan on what to do about it. The lyrics continue:

I went sky diving, I went rocky mountain climbing, I went two point seven seconds on a bull

named Fumanchu, And I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter, and I gave forgiveness I'd been denying, and I said one day I hope you get a chance to live like you were dying."

The message is one that Schwager, diagnosed in 2003 with limited scleroderma, holds close to her heart.

"Obviously living with a chronic disease changes you," said Schwager, who earlier this year was appointed to a seat on the board of the New England Chapter of the Scleroderma Foundation. "At first, I had a lot of fear because I had no idea exactly what would happen to me or how I would be affected. As time passed, I realized that I was fine for today, and was able to remind myself to live each day instead of worrying about the future.

"I have decided that I am healthy

for today—which is all that really matters."

Elaine's mother Lynn added, "I marvel at her strength, determination and understanding about not wasting one day. She's truly a remarkable young woman."

Quite the Athlete

Sports have always been a part of Schwager's life. She was a catcher in both Little League baseball and later softball, despite her small size. She was so good in high school (Salem, New Hampshire) that she was named to the high school's athletic hall of fame. Her team lost three games in four years, and won two state titles. She also made the all-state teams in softball and field hockey.

At Boston University, Schwager continued to excel on the softball

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– Elaine Schwager



Elaine with her trusted sidekick Pivo

diamond, making several conference all-star teams as the Terriers won two league titles.

As her playing career began to wind down, Schwager had some decisions to make: most importantly being what she was going to do in the “real world.” She had decided just two classes shy of receiving her undergraduate degree that she was going to drop out of school when a fortuitous phone call from her former high school softball coach changed her plans. Schwager was asked by the coach if she had an interest in joining him on the softball staff at

the University of Massachusetts Lowell. She did, and after changing her major, Schwager graduated from Boston University a year later.

A fierce competitor who enjoys seeing youngsters mature and turn into leaders, Schwager has found coaching to be her passion. After the Lowell experience, she spent two years as the head coach at Regis College, and five more at Suffolk University in Boston. At Suffolk, Schwager was a two-time conference coach of the year. She also spent two years as the head coach of the Croatian national softball team,

an experience she termed “at first scary, but great.” She just finished her second year at Merrimack.

Ciao, Stress

Growing up, Schwager had a tendency to worry often on many things that were out of her control. It was while vacationing in Italy with her mother that the stress she carried with her went ciao.

“I realized that happiness was a choice,” she said. “If you like yourself, then you have to embrace all of yourself.”

Just like that, her mindset had gone from one of angst to one of optimism and confidence.

“She lives her life in a way few do, and she often says how thankful she is for each day,” said Michelle Frazier, a friend, who played under Schwager and later coached together.

During her final year at Suffolk in 2004, months after being diagnosed with scleroderma, Schwager had the word “today” printed on the back of the team’s shirts.

“That’s what we are worried about, what we can do today to be better,” Schwager told her team.

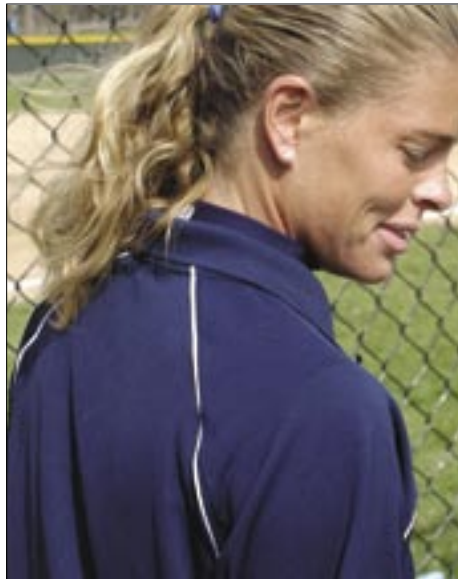
Tomorrow’s Only a Day Away

Yet Schwager had an eye on tomorrow, when in 2005, at the age of 33, she opened a health club named Fitness for You, mere minutes from Merrimack. The young entrepreneur now oversees a staff of 30 in a handsome-looking, two-story building complete with state-of-the-art fitness equipment, locker rooms that include high-definition, wall-mounted televisions, a juice bar, a room for children, and more.

Despite its size, the club has a comfortable, at-home feeling, thanks to the presence of Schwager’s lovable chocolate labrador, Pivo, who meanders around the club as if he, not his roommate, owns the place.

Business is good (the club had 1,600 members at the time of this writing), and Schwager has a flair for customer service, as she has made a concerted effort to know the first names of most of the regulars. The fact she is there daily also helps.

While the business has provided Schwager with solid



Factoid: In 2000, during her first and only attempt, Elaine ran the Boston Marathon in a rather remarkable time of 3 hours, 48 minutes.

financial means and professional satisfaction, it has also served as an outlet to educate people on scleroderma.

“Her willingness to share her disease with people has made for a very different atmosphere in the gym,” said Lynn, who works at the club by cleaning windows and floors. “So now you have all these people who know, and two people who are members who have family members who have been diagnosed. It’s become very much like a family atmosphere—and it’s because of Elaine.”

In fact, Schwager thinks raising awareness is as important or more so than raising money.

“We all could benefit from learning more about scleroderma, from people with the disease, to people who have friends and families affected by it, to doctors who could know more too,” she said.

The club is not the only place where Schwager has shared her story. Her players at Suffolk and now Merrimack know about the disease and how it has affected Schwager, and have participated in “Stepping Out for Scleroderma” walks. Two months ago, Schwager

held the second annual “Fitness For You” golf tournament to raise more awareness and funds.

And the Day After That?

Recently, Schwager underwent a sympathectomy on her fingers to improve circulation in the area and help with the pain and infections. The nerve pain made sleeping difficult, worsening her mood. She has no other symptoms, and exercises regularly. Because she is a candidate to get pulmonary hypertension, doctors frequently monitor her condition in case that develops.

As for the future, Schwager dreams of owning more healthclubs while continuing to coach, although she is unsure if she will have to coach in a warmer climate.

One thing is for sure: Today is going to be a great day for Elaine Schwager.

For more information on Elaine Schwager, please log on to our Web site, www.scleroderma.org/elaineschwager to read letters from her friends.