



When award-winning actor **CAMRYN MANHEIM'S** hand pain went from nuisance to debilitating, she knew she had to get some answers – and fast.

BY LISSA POIROT

# The Role of a Lifetime

**F**OR EIGHT YEARS ON SUNDAY NIGHTS AT 10 PM, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WATCHED CAMRYN MANHEIM AS ELEANOR FRUTT, THE DYNAMIC, SINGLE-MOM LAWYER ON THE LEGAL DRAMA “THE PRACTICE.” Manheim brought to life the strong character who would give all she had to each of her clients and didn’t set down the fight until justice prevailed. In real life, Manheim truly is a strong character and a single mom who doesn’t quit a good fight. In real life, Manheim, the 45-year-old winner of both an Emmy Award and a Golden Globe Award for her portrayal of Frutt, isn’t fighting legal battles. Instead, she’s fighting a battle with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).



## Behind-the-Scenes Drama

Manheim has earned her place in television history and is a bonafide star. But arthritis doesn’t care who you are, and Manheim certainly didn’t get the star treatment when pain began nagging and then knocking and then banging.

Manheim’s first taste of acting was as a young child. She grew up to win roles in some of television’s hottest shows, including “Law & Order” and “Chicago Hope,” before landing her starring role on “The Practice.” Manheim quickly became a person “regular” people could relate to, proudly fighting the Hollywood stereotype and accepting her Emmy Award on behalf of, as she announced, “all the fat girls.”

While in school, Manheim mastered sign language and worked as an interpreter, and has since remained an interpreter, teacher and advocate. Her hands became important tools in speaking with the hearing impaired, and it was her hands that first gave away her RA.

“When I was an interpreter my hands were very dexterous and I could sign a mile a minute. But one day, I went to teach sign language at my son’s preschool. I noticed for the first time my hands weren’t operating like they used to and I couldn’t completely create the letter ‘e.’ It scared me,” she says.

Scared didn’t lead to immediate action, however. Manheim pushed through her pain and ignored symptoms. She chalked up fatigue to her role as a busy, working mother of five-year-old son, Milo. When her hands would become stiff, she assumed she overdid it one day, even finding excuses like retaining too much water after indulging in salty sushi the night before.

“Leave it to women to just kind of push aside the pain and go, ‘I have to take care of the kids, I have to get to work, I have this project I’m doing.’ And we don’t get involved in it because at first it’s just annoying,” she says.

But the persistent pain became more than annoying to Manheim. It began to interfere with her work and her interactions with her son, with pain and fatigue on the forefront of daily activities. Finally, she sought treatment.

## In Search of a Diagnosis

Initially, Manheim was told the pain was due to aging and signing. “My doctor said he thought maybe my intrinsic

[muscles connecting the wrist to the knuckles] were very tight, and recommended hand therapy. I was thinking, ‘Great. Whatever it takes, I want to fix it,’” she says. “So I tried hand therapy. When that didn’t work I even wore braces to keep my fingers down to try to strengthen and stretch them,” she says.

When over-the-counter anti-inflammatories stopped working to relieve the pain, Manheim’s doctor prescribed steroids, and the pain subsided. But once she stopped her treatment, her pain came back, with a vengeance. Manheim decided to conduct her own research, finally recognizing what her doctor didn’t. Her problem was something bigger than aging. Seeking the counsel of numerous doctors, it was Manheim’s hand surgeon who persuaded her to visit a rheumatologist who finally diagnosed her condition.

“I thought, ‘I’m 40, I’m not going to go to a rheumatologist, I don’t have arthritis, that’s crazy.’ He said ‘I have a sneaking suspicion you might get some good answers,’” says Manheim.

She did get the answers she was looking for. Although relieved to have an answer to her pain and put on a treatment that eased it, Manheim was stunned to learn of her joint damage.

“It took close to eight months for me to get properly diagnosed and treated. I lost valuable time, and the joint damage I sustained is irreversible. That’s the worst news I’ve received. Doctors don’t yet have a way to build back the damaged joints. When I look at my hands now to sign, I know that I’m never going to get my mobility back,” she says.

Manheim is now sharing her story with the world. Understanding that joint damage is irreversible, she’s on a mission to make women and men seek help earlier, in hopes of stopping joint erosion before it gets to the point of no return.

“I decided I was going to attack this disease in the same ferocious way it was attacking me,” she says. “I’m sharing my story with the hope that it will inspire others to take control of their RA, by learning more about the disease and working with a rheumatologist to manage it.”

Today, Manheim counts her blessings that she was diagnosed quickly and is on an aggressive treatment plan that helps her maintain her busy lifestyle. “I’ve got a lot to do and so much to live for,” Manheim says. “I’m thankful I was diagnosed early because I know I’ll be around for a long time.”

*Lissa Poirot is Arthritis Today’s managing editor.*

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