



Live Long & Prosper
Mitchell (as Tevanik, one of his three roles on *Star Trek: Discovery*) “brings such heart to his characters,” says co-showrunner Michelle Paradise.

STAR TREK'S KENNETH MITCHELL

‘I Have ALS and I’m Not Giving Up Hope’

AFTER A DEVASTATING DIAGNOSIS, THE ACTOR IS CHERISHING TIME WITH HIS FAMILY—AND FINDING WAYS TO CONTINUE HIS CAREER
By **CHRISTINA DUGAN**

Photographs by **CHLOE AFTEL**



In a moment of pure joy, Kenneth Mitchell crowd-surfed through a sea of fans on a *Star Trek* cruise in early March. “I felt different hands, lifting me up and supporting me,” the *Star Trek: Discovery* actor, 45, recalls. “It was a beautiful metaphor of everything that I’m going through.” Just a few days before, Mitchell publicly revealed he is living with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, a debilitating and often terminal neurological disease that slowly takes away a person’s ability to control his or her muscles. “I can’t hide it anymore,” says Mitchell, who was diagnosed with limb onset ALS (a form of the disease that attacks limbs first) in August 2018 and began using a wheelchair last October. “I have ALS and I’m not giving up hope. I feel like it’s time for me to be a voice.”

Married for almost 14 years, the Toronto native and his wife, Susan May Pratt, who has appeared in films such as *Center Stage* and *10 Things I Hate About You*, have built a comfortable life together as successful, if not widely famous, actors.

They live in Studio City, Calif., with their kids, 12-year-old daughter Lilah and 7-year-old son Kallum. Mitchell says it took a while to come to grips with the gravity of his diagnosis, but he was overwhelmed with gratitude as friends and family showered him with love and support. “Over time I think I began to accept this with grace,” he says. “I’m trying to see the beauty in it.” He’s also continuing to act, starring in the CW’s *Nancy Drew* and the upcoming FX on Hulu series *The Old Man*, in a role created specifically for him as an FBI agent who uses a wheelchair. His wife isn’t surprised by his positive outlook. “He’s always been able to roll with the punches,” says Pratt, 46.

‘You’ve got to just keep moving forward and adapting’
—KENNETH MITCHELL

Since childhood, Mitchell, the son of David, a contractor, and Diane, a nurse, has loved sports and being active. He



Soul Mates
“I love her so much,” Mitchell (on his 2006 wedding day with Pratt) says of his actress wife. “I don’t know how she does it all.”

thing to do with the gym, but the twitching never went away,” he says. At first doctors suggested he was suffering from either a pinched nerve or multiple sclerosis (his mother has MS), but further testing showed he had ALS. “It was like I was in my own movie, watching that scene where someone is being told that they have a terminal illness,” he says of hearing the diagnosis for the first time.” Says Pratt: “The air left the room. I couldn’t breathe anymore.” Adds Mitchell: “There was something really simple and beautiful, in a way, about how we were in the trenches together. And we mourned.”

The couple also consulted experts on how to break the news to their children, who were 11 and 5 at the time, and wound up speaking to them separately. “Our daughter asked, ‘Is Papa going to die?’” recalls Pratt. “I was hesitant and said, ‘Well, we’re all going to die.’ She said, ‘But when I’m a kid.’ I said, ‘Well, it’s possible.’ She sat on his lap and cried.” Their son had a different reaction. “We were like, ‘Hey, Kall, we need to talk to you,’” says Pratt. “We didn’t want to talk about dying because he doesn’t understand that at 5. We told him that Dad has an illness and we’re going to do everything we can. And he goes, ‘This is not what I came here to talk about.’ He thought he was in trouble!”

From that moment the family became more united than ever. “We pulled the kids out of school and took vacations,” says Mitchell. “It took up a lot of energy and time just nurturing my relationships [with loved ones] and grieving with them.” Mitchell even began checking things off of his bucket list—including a trip to the U.K. with a few of his closest friends to see a soccer match and a U2 concert. For a daily status check, the actor, who has appeared on *Star Trek: Discovery* since it



Family First
“Kids have such an innocence and a hope that other people don’t,” says Mitchell (with daughter Lilah, son Kallum and wife Pratt). “I draw on that a lot.”

played soccer for five years at his college, the University of Guelph, where he studied landscape architecture. “[Soccer] was a big part of my persona,” he says. But to his surprise, after getting involved as a camper turned counselor in a local camp, he quickly developed a passion for acting and dance. He began landing small parts—including in the 2002 TV movie *Charms for the Easy Life*, where he met his wife. He booked his first major role in Disney’s 2004 hockey film *Miracle*. “It was one of my favorite jobs to date,” says Mitchell. “It was special to me to marry my athletic past with current storytelling passions.” Memorable roles on TV dramas such as *Jericho*, *Ghost Whisperer* and *The Astronaut Wives Club* followed.



Shortly after filming a small role in the movie *Captain Marvel*, Mitchell began to feel lethargic and was experiencing fasciculations, or twitching, in his left arm, but didn’t think much of it. “I thought it was from coffee or dehydration or some-

You May Recognize Him From...



Miracle
Mitchell, who portrayed hockey player Ralph Cox, calls the 2004 film “one of the greatest sports movies of all time.”



Jericho
Mitchell, as deputy mayor Eric Green in the 2006-08 CBS series, is a “unique talent,” says producer Dan Shottz.



The Astronaut Wives Club
Mitchell says the “wonderful people” on shows like this 2015 ABC drama keep him “inspired.”



The Old Man
“It’s really empowering,” Shottz says of Mitchell in the upcoming FX on Hulu series. “This is the first role on camera where he is playing his current truth.”

PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOP LEFT: RUSS MARTIN/CBS; THIS SPREAD: COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY, KENNETH MITCHELL (2); COURTESY CBS; COOK ALLEN/WALT DISNEY TELEVISION/GETTY IMAGES; FOX/STUDIOS/FX; GROOMER: JAMES MCMAHON/CLOUTIER RENIX

premiered in 2017, would do the iconic “Live Long and Prosper” hand sign with both hands every morning. “Eventually I couldn’t do it on my left, but I could still do it on my right hand,” he says. In October 2019, he woke up and wasn’t able to do it at all. “I think of that as the marking point of my loss of independence,” he says.

Nevertheless, he was determined to continue his career. “I still wanted to work,” says Mitchell. “Here I was faced with something taken away from me—why should I stop something else? I really wanted to keep inspiring myself.” He privately dealt with his diagnosis for as long as he could, but as he became more accepting of his disease, he also realized it was time to start sharing with his costars and producers. “It became really liberating not to have to hide what was happening to me,” says Mitchell, whose treatment includes occupational and physical therapy and breathing exercises. His *Star Trek* family and colleagues on his other shows reacted with strong support. “Although it feels more challenging, people are accommodating and making it work,” says Mitchell. “They do it in a way that they don’t ever make me feel like I’m dragging things out or a hindrance or anything. It always makes me feel like I’m still an asset, and that’s really empowering.”

“The hardest thing about all this has been my kids. I want to keep inspiring them.”
—KENNETH MITCHELL

People health WHAT IS ALS?

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease, is a progressive neurodegenerative disease affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. Patients progressively lose their ability to walk, control movements, eat, speak and eventually breathe. “The average life span [after diagnosis] is three to five years, but there’s a huge range,” says Dr. Merit Cudkovicz, director of the Healey Center for ALS at Mass General Hospital. While the disease, which inspired the Ice Bucket Challenge in 2014, currently has no cure, experts are working to find one. “It’s a really hopeful time for ALS,” says Cudkovicz.

Now Mitchell, whose shows are wrapped or on hiatus, says he’s cherishing every moment with his family. (His doctors have advised him to stay home amid the coronavirus crisis.) “We aspire to live life to the fullest and seize each day,” he says. “I feel like I’ve done that. I think when you’re truly faced with death, you can really see that the highs are higher, the lows are lower, and you can move forward with a different zest for life. And that’s a gift.” ●