

Former Habs enforcer tells it like it is in Knuckles: The Chris Nilan Story

BRENDAN KELLY

Things get real quickly with Chris Nilan.

There he was on Friday morning at the venerable Bishop St. restaurant Da Vinci announcing his latest project, *Knuckles: The Chris Nilan Story*, a one-man show that will premiere May 28 at Maison Principale in St-Henri. Its initial run is four nights, May 28 and 30, and June 3 and 5.

All proceeds from the tickets, which cost \$350 for dinner and the show, go to the Barry F. Lorenzetti Foundation, which focuses on mental-health-care initiatives in Canada.

The show's director Vittorio Rossi — who also happens to be one of English Montreal's most noted playwrights — had some nice things to say about Nilan, the former Montreal Canadiens player who played 688 National Hockey League regular-season games for the Habs, New York Rangers and Boston Bruins. Nilan won the Stanley Cup with Montreal in 1986. He was also one of the toughest guys ever to play for the Canadiens and the guy affectionately known as

Knuckles had more than his fair share of fights over the years.

Barry Lorenzetti, the producer of the show, also spoke eloquently about Nilan.

But when Nilan himself stepped up to the microphone, all of a sudden the packed room on the second floor of Da Vinci went dead quiet as the Boston-born hockey player started talking about his roller-coaster of a life that went from the ultimate natural high of winning the Cup with Montreal to the horrific lows of drug and alcohol addiction in his post-career years.

Nilan started by talking about how he felt that first night at the Montreal Forum, walking on to the ice to hear 17,000 fans cheering and all of a sudden the memories started flooding back to him. And he thought that night: "They didn't have a clue who Chris Nilan was or where he came from. So I kinda figured they were clapping for the logo on the front, not the name on the back."

Nilan then turned to this new show about his life.

"I've come to tell my story not as a victim, but as a survivor," he said. And that's when things got real.

He talked of how far he fell, how he nearly died. How two of his former Canadiens teammates offered him a lifeline — Serge Savard and Bob Gainey, both of whom later became general managers of the team. Both were there Friday to make it clear they still supported their old friend.

Nilan told a story of how one day Gainey came to see him and handed him a business card, for someone from the NHL who helped players with addiction issues. He didn't call right away, but a while later, when things got even tougher, he did, and as people in these situations often say, that phone call saved his life. He broke down while telling this story and had to fight back the tears while continuing his story.

"A lot of the pain in my life came from the lies I was telling myself," Nilan said. "And until I was ready to get honest with myself and be able to open up to another human being about my life, and what I'd been through, I was going to stay stuck. I believe I was only as sick as my secrets and I believe hurt people hurt people. And I was sick of hurting people. And I wanted to



Former Montreal Canadiens enforcer Chris Nilan gets choked up while telling the story about how a phone call to get help with his addiction issues saved his life. *JOHN MAHONEY*

get well."

He spoke of how when his career ended "I had this big empty hole in my soul and I went to a place that I don't wish on anybody."

At the end of the question period, Savard — one of the key figures in the last 50 years of Canadiens history — stood up and asked if he could say a few words. No one objected.

"I first met Chris at the morning skate at the Boston Garden," Savard said. "I had no idea who he was. He walked to the bus, we were all on the bus coming back to the hotel, and he saw (Canadiens player) Gilles Lupien and he said: 'Next year, I'll take your job.' But I got to know him well and he's got the best quality a man can have

— he's a good person and he's an honest person. And what he's trying to do is to make a difference in other people's lives. He had a lot of problems, but he's also helped a lot of people, including one person in my own family."

Rossi — author of the hit plays *The Chain*, *Paradise by the River* and many others — said working with Nilan is one of the highlights of his career.

"We all know him as a hockey player," Rossi said. "I'm getting to know him in a different way. He's a natural-born storyteller with a lot to say. He speaks from the gut. He's bold while being sensitive and he's always honest."

For tickets visit fondationlorenzetti.org