

What Though the Odds

Amazing recovery fueled by the Notre Dame spirit

SHEILAFLYNN

Autumn football weekends provided an escape for a young Jim Connelly. On Saturday afternoons, he could briefly forget about his life in the projects of a Pennsylvania factory town, his alcoholic father and his family's frequent evictions. He could listen to Notre Dame games on the radio with his mother, an avid Irish fan, and dream of a bright future in a different world.

"My identification with success in life was all through Notre Dame," says Connelly, the co-founder of Integrated Communications Services and chairman of the company. Although he never played football or even attended Notre Dame, Connelly has achieved a level of success here: his inspirational novel *One More Sunset* has been endorsed by both Lou Holtz and the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh. The success story at the heart of *One More Sunset* is not, however, the story of Connelly's rise to economic success. Rather, it is the story of the amazing recovery of his close friend, Donna Jones, who suffered a severe head injury in a 1985 accident.

Connelly and Jones, a salesperson for Eastman Kodak, met on a business trip in the early 1980s. Jones' ambition and determination as she climbed the sales ladder at Kodak impressed Connelly. In her, Connelly saw the opportunity to repay some debts of his own.

"A lot of people helped me," Connelly says of his own experience as a young businessperson. "Whenever I asked them how I could pay them back, they said, 'You'll have the same opportunity to help another person someday.'"

After the trip, Connelly and Jones stayed in touch and, as Jones looked to Connelly for business advice, they became good friends as well as business partners. "Donna was Kodak's 13th-ranked salesperson nationally when I met her," Connelly says. "Together, we got her to No. 1."

But Jones' bright future clouded on April 8, 1985, when she crashed while snowmobiling in Montana. Three hours passed before a helicopter arrived at the scene of the accident, and Jones sank into a 48-day coma. When she finally awoke, doctors expressed little hope for any significant recovery

and recommended that Jones be placed in an institution. Connelly took it upon himself to visit one such institution and observe it firsthand. "That was the turning point," he says. "I could not let any person be put in there. It's really [a] warehousing of people."

Connelly threw himself wholeheartedly into re-teaching Jones how to live an independent, "normal" life. He enlisted doctors, therapists, friends, family members and neighbors to help him rebuild Jones' life and confidence. Together, Connelly and his group of caretakers soon disproved doctors' predictions that Jones would never regain a significant portion of her damaged faculties. She improved rapidly, moving into her own Manhattan Beach, Calif. apartment, taking care of herself, going for walks, shopping and making new friends.

One of those new friends was publicist Paula Sarcona. Jones encountered Sarcona while walking on the beach and quickly befriended her. In the end, it was Sarcona who suggested that Connelly write a book and who acted as the driving force behind its publication.

After deciding that all the revenues from book sales would be channeled into a trust fund for Jones, work immediately began on the publication and marketing of the book. For the foreword, Connelly contacted an old friend: Lou Holtz. Connelly had been introduced to Holtz at the 1968 Notre Dame vs. USC football game, and the two had become close friends. Holtz had experienced directly the trauma of medical crisis when his wife battled cancer, and, after meeting and speaking with Jones, he agreed to contribute to the book. "After reading this book, I couldn't possibly say no," Holtz writes. "As in our own search for answers, I feel one of the valuable aspects of this book is that it will give all of us a better understanding of the emotions and concerns an individual and their family experiences when they suffer a disability, injury or illness."

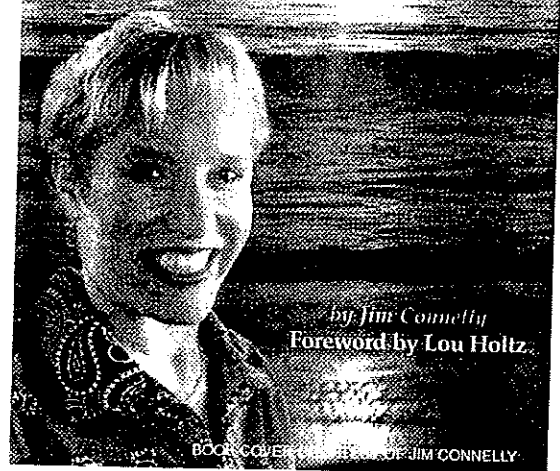
Holtz wasn't the only celebrity to endorse the book. Hesburgh, hockey star Wayne Gretzky and the Rev. Edmund P. Joyce also provided back-cover blurbs of the work.

Today, Connelly lives in a house on the edge of the Notre Dame campus with his wife and nine-year-old daughter, but he and Jones still speak daily. Every year, on the anniversary of the accident, they celebrate Jones' life.

Although not completely recovered, Jones

One More Sunset

A True Story of Survival through Commitment, Trust and Love



has made more progress than anyone ever expected and continues to improve, "learning, reading, growing, retaining and sharing new information."

Once Connelly used the Notre Dame image as inspiration for his own dreams in life. He kept that spirit when he helped Jones succeed in business, and, moreover, when he helped her start the road back to recovery. In *One More Sunset*, Connelly shows that the spirit of the Irish is not limited to life under the Golden Dome. □