

# South Bay

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## Caring for injured friend makes for life of accomplishment

Jim was astounded by Jim Connelly and Donna Jones when I met them a few years back. By then, Jim — a former Beverly Hills hotel manager and second-to-none bachelor — already had dedicated five years of his life to caring for Donna.

Let me be clear here, if clarity in such an unusual situation is possible, Jim is not married to Donna. At the time of the 1985 accident that nearly killed the high-powered saleswoman, he was 48 and she 30. The relationship, as he described it, was mentor/student.

Both had come up the hard way; both were fun-loving types. She was all energy and he was the suave older man with deep blue eyes and filthy rich friends.

When they met in Vegas, Jim asked Donna if she wanted to see Sinatra on stage. Sure, sure she would. So Connelly called Frank direct and made arrangements.

In short, they quickly became blood kin without sharing actual blood.

That would come later when Donna accompanied Jimmy, as she calls him, in a friend's private jet to Montana. The friend was buying a ranch and wanted Jim's opinion.

While Jim advised, Donna went snowmobiling in the frozen April woods. It was very nearly the last thing she would ever do and certainly the last thing she would do completely without the help of Jim Connelly, a man who — by his own admission — had until that time led a life that was all about helping himself.

It's a long and terrible story, but all we really



John Bogert

have to do is picture Donna — young, blond and full of beans — driving a snowmobile over a rise with the throttle jammed (she eventually received a cash settlement from the manufacturer) full-open and crashing on a frozen lake.

She would die twice and be revived before being helicoptered to a hospital where surgeons couldn't promise Jim that his friend would survive. But she was young and strong. And it was that strength, doctors believe, that saved her from the head trauma and helped her through weeks of coma and a slow wake-up that caused still other physicians to recommend placing her in an institution.

And she might have ended up hidden from view if hadn't been for Jim and for a single sentence.

"A doctor told me that all head injuries are different," Jim said as he walked me around the rambling Manhattan Beach apartment he shares with his wife, Kate Kelly, and their 11-month-old daughter. "If they were all different, then they could not all be the same. They left a door open and we ran through it."

Now, how does one convey the actual passing through that door? How does one relate the emotional investment and the leap of faith involved in Jim's moving Donna — minus short-term memory and in a kind of fog — back to her Manhattan Beach apartment and how he began caring for her while refusing to let go or let up?

Years slide by in a single sentence. But picture the former jet-setter driving down at 5 every morning from his Marina del Rey home to sit in a restaurant across Highland Boulevard from Donna's apartment and not going in to check on her until he sees her bedroom light.

Think about all the evenings and weekends spent at her side and about the day some months after the accident when he flew to Paris for a wine tasting, then quickly flew right back after realizing that a new Jim Connelly had found a mission more important and more impossible than any he had ever undertaken.

Eventually, he would move in directly across from Donna so he could better care for her. And he'd marry as well, taking his new wife into the care loop.

"I'm not sure where Jim gets his sense of responsibility," said Kate, who is in the real estate business with her husband. "I just think it was always in him somewhere."

Jim himself can't explain his devotion to Donna, who is vastly and delightfully improved over our last meeting and who is now traveling with the Manhattan Seniors, a group of retirees who took the fun-loving Donna under their

wings.

"I was unable to go on with my life after this happened," Jim said, "beyond that I can't say why."

Yet there is more than a little explanation as we walk next door to see Donna. And if I said the still very pretty and talkative woman's eyes brightened at the sight of her friend I'd be vastly understating.

"Jimmy says I'm the only person he knows who gets better every day," she laughed, sitting with the vast Pacific spread out behind her.

Connelly laughed too, but recalls when he alone was able to see her daily improvements, improvements small and fine but adding up to a mountain that Donna herself can now look down from to see how far she has traveled.

"I'm pleased with life," she said, unable to help that broad smile. "It's all Jimmy, the best person in the world, the wind beneath my wings, my hero."

"But it's not like I'm coaching a losing team," Connelly added, keeping a slight distance, like making certain that someone he loves stands on her own. "I have a winner here."

Before Donna and before Kate and the new baby, Jim Connelly passed through life like wind. And he surely believes that he could have passed from it having accomplishing nothing at all.

That's not true anymore.