

Miracle in Manhattan

Woman finds new life downtown on long way back from head injury

by Paul Silva

There is a miracle living in downtown Manhattan Beach.

She lives right behind Christie's card shop on Highland Avenue. She lunches at the Criterion, shops for groceries at Safeway and runs along The Strand. She is friends with just about everyone, but few realize that by rights she shouldn't be here at all.

A little more than two years ago, on April 5, 1985, Donna Jones, then 30, was riding a snowmobile over a frozen lake in the outback of Montana. By all indications, the throttle suddenly stuck and she crashed into a parked snowmobile. At first she had no pulse, but CPR eventually generated the weakest signs of life.

Her fellow riders kept her alive on the ice for three hours before a helicopter arrived to take her to a hospital. That she lived to receive care at all is amazing. But, despite the dramatic rescue, Donna's nightmare was just beginning, and there would be much darkness before even the slightest glimpse of light.

She was in a coma for 48 days. She had a broken jaw, dental damage, severe liver damage, broken ribs and both her lungs had collapsed. She lost five pints of blood in the accident. She also had head injuries.

It was seven days into her coma before an eyelid fluttered, her first movement since the accident. Doctors, surprised that she even survived the accident, were uncertain she would ever walk, talk or have any semblance of a normal life again.

Two long years later, Donna lives on her own, gets up at 6 a.m. to run on The Strand and work out on an exercise bike and meets friends for breakfast at the Criterion or Uncle Bill's. She is also writing a book about getting from point A to point B and all the frightening and mysterious points in between.

"When I had my accident, there was no case history from a patient's point of view for me to go to for help," she said in an interview last week in her tidy one-bedroom apartment with a view of the pier. "I want to help other people so that they will know what to expect."

Sitting across from Donna, wearing a wide, proud smile, was Jim Connelly. It was Connelly with whom Donna traveled to Montana. He has been with her for every step of her recovery.

"I didn't realize what an enormous undertaking this would be," Jim said. "It's been a lot of work, but it was all her. It was her drive and her determination."

Before the accident, Donna was a top salesperson for Kodak Film, working out of the Whittier office. She was good. She had confidence. She loved talking to groups. She liked setting goals and capturing them. She won awards. In short, she had all the makings of a great salesperson, which is exactly why she could sell herself and her friends on the idea that she would live and live well again after the accident. It would prove to be the toughest deal she ever closed.

From the hospital in Montana, Donna was flown to the Yale-New Haven Medical Center so she could be near her family in North Haven. By July she was responding well, but still had problems with her short-term memory. To this day, she doesn't remember the two months before or after the accident, nor does she have any memory of the accident.

Jim became dissatisfied with the care Donna was receiving and decided, against the doctors' advice, to move Donna to the West Coast, to Daniel Freeman Hospital in Inglewood.

"They (Yale-New Haven) just weren't prepared to handle head injury," he said. But Daniel Freeman was ready, with its New Pathways, a program designed especially for the brain injured.

An old friend of Jim's, Betty Noble, worked at the hospital and introduced him to Dr. Barry Ludwig, a neurologist. "We showed up with just Donna, no records or anything," Jim remembered. "He was beautiful and understanding."

Donna's injury soon provided an education and ordeal, not only for her but for Jim and the dozens of people who helped her along the way. "It has really made me think about the people behind the wheelchairs in this country," he said. "They are a silent society."

In directing Donna's recovery, Jim decided that she would recover best in her own home with the help of family and friends. Thus, what Jim refers to as the "A-Team" was born.

The team included Jim's mother and two sisters and other close friends and members of both Jim and Donna's families. When Donna first arrived in Manhattan Beach, the going was tough. She had to learn everything all over again: how to eat, how to talk, even how to go to the bathroom.

Her mind was foggy. She thought she was in Hawaii. Jim walked with her around the small apartment all night as her awakening brain kept her from sleep. She wouldn't believe Jim when he would tell her who he was. "Do you know Jim Connelly?" she would ask. She finally believed him when she attended a birthday party in his honor.

"They all said he was Jim and I figured he couldn't fake all that," she remembered.

Ron and Christie, owners of Christie, the card shop that Donna lives behind, posted a large sign on their back window saying, "Welcome to Manhattan Beach, Donna." She saw it everyday and soon remembered where she was.

She continued physical and psychological therapy at New Pathways. Disappointed that her once precise handwriting had become sloppy, she began to keep a diary in order to practice writing. It is that diary that will become the book "Head Injury From a Patient's Point of View." In it, she noted what she thought the doctors and therapists were doing both right and wrong.

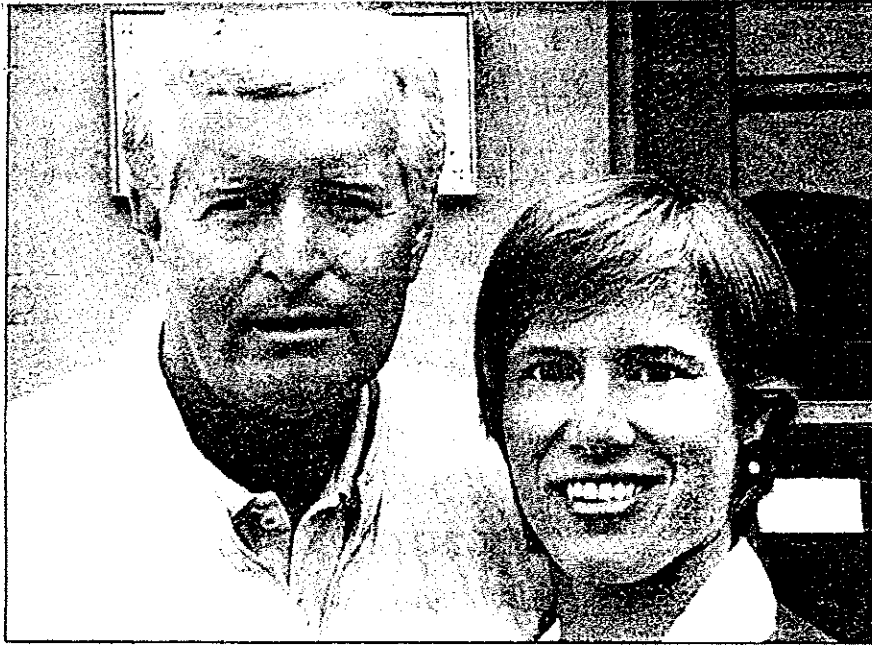
There were bright moments that broke up the monotony of therapy. Wayne Gretsky, famed Edmonton Oilers hockey player and a friend of Jim's, wrote her a note of encouragement and invited her to watch a practice session when the team was in town. Singer Larry Gatlin also cheered on her recovery.

And always there was the A-team. Irene Kolman, a friend Donna met after the accident, helped her organize her desk so she would know where to find everything. Irene and Donna also played tennis and went out to lunch; Donna made friends with many servers in the local eateries.

There were others. Sue Erickson, a fellow Kodak salesperson, came by for dinner and filled Donna in on all that was new with the company. Donna's boss, Janet Sanchez, sent her a Kodak T-shirt and made sure she knew that her job was still waiting for her.

They were all working hard, but no one was working as hard as Donna. "She had that drive . . . she was a winner," Jim said. "If they told her to swim two laps in the pool, she would swim eight."

Not remembering the accident proved
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Jim Connelly and Donna Jones

(photo by Paul Silva)

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to be both a blessing and a curse. "I didn't remember, so it was like nothing happened to me," she said. "I couldn't see why I just didn't get up and go to work like I always had."

But the accident had presented a much harder assignment than Kodak would ever offer, and Donna was winning, slowly, with setbacks, but winning nonetheless. Soon she found herself giving the lecture at a New Pathways session, speaking, with expertise, on the differences between the right and left sides of the brain.

Giving the lecture was a high point. Visiting the Marina City Club was a low one. Before the accident, she and Jim had spent much time there with friends. Ironically, it was there, in posh surroundings rather than the grim hospital, that Donna felt worst about the accident.

"I thought, 'I haven't seen these

friends for two years' and I suddenly realized that a big chunk of my life had been taken away," she said. Then, characteristically, she put a positive angle on the memory. "But if I hadn't gone, maybe I would still be groping around; I would not have touched that sadness."

Once touched, Donna said, much of the sadness left her. It is still gone and she doesn't expect it back. She spends her days typing her book on her computer, staying in shape and looking forward to capturing more sales awards than her walls can support. She also hopes to educate people, patients and caregivers alike, on the shadowy journey head injured people travel. Donna wants to tell them that the sadness does leave, even if it has to be kicked out, and that life returns.

"It is kind of overwhelming for me to think of what I've been through," she said. "But I've just said to myself, 'This is what I have. I'll go from here.'"