

MANHATTAN BEACH

Friendship and Recovery

The remarkable story of Manhattan Beach resident Donna Jones, who survived a serious head injury, is now the subject of a book.

by Cindy Yoshiyama

It has been almost 16 years since Manhattan Beach resident Donna Jones was involved in a serious snowmobiling accident that left her with what doctors said would be a permanently debilitating head injury. Her story of survival and recovery with the dedicated help of her friend, Jim Connelly, has been nothing short of an inspiration.

Now, at age 46, Jones continues to astound the medical world with her progress and thrive in the community that both she and Connelly say have helped her through the recovery process. They, along with good friend and confidant, Paula Sarcona, are sharing their journey of pain, commitment, joy and inspiration in a book titled, "One More Sunset," which details the incredible true story of Jones' life since the accident.

Connelly and Jones met in 1982 at the MGM casino in Las Vegas when he was a rich, jet-setting bachelor. At the time, Jones was the top salesperson for Eastman Kodak. The two became friends. Connelly says that at the time he was impressed with Jones' integrity. She was responsible, motivated and ferociously independent.

Then the accident that would change her life forever happened. On a vacation with Connelly in Montana, Jones was riding a snow-

mobile that lost control, flipped and catapulted her onto the ice.

After lying in a coma for 48 days, Jones emerged virtually lifeless. From that point on, Connelly took over every aspect of her recovery, committing every minute of his day, not to mention practically every penny in his bank account, to finding the resources that



Jim Connelly, Donna Jones and Paula Sarcona pose with the book about Jones' life after her accident.

(photo by Chris Miller)

would help her build her life back.

"I was unable to walk on with my life and leave hers in shatters," Connelly recalls.

The recovery process was by no means an easy climb and not a path they took alone. Helping Jones in those first few years was

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harder than taking care of a child, Connelly says, because children can learn what not to do to keep them from harm. The accident caused a closed head injury to the right side of her brain, the portion that engages short-term memory. Without it, she could not remember people she met 15 minutes after she met them and had to be watched around the clock.

Connelly says his dedication to her recovery became a type of obsession in his efforts to protect her from pain.

"I lost faith in the hospitals," he says. "I was suspect of everything and everybody. No matter where she was, I made sure someone was there. I thought she'd wake up, and no one was going to love her and that no one cared about her. But really it didn't matter who was sitting there with her. No one was good enough, no matter how much money I paid."

When Sarcona met Jones for the first time by chance on the beach in 1994, Sarcona says she was immediately drawn toward Jones' positive outlook.

"I fell in love with Donna the first day I met her," Sarcona says. "She had a zest for life."

According to Connelly, it was Sar-

cona's involvement with Jones' recovery that helped him to come full circle.

"Paula ran interference and helped us recharge our batteries," he says. "I was unraveling again after nine years. They (Sarcona and Jones) were always having fun and allowed me to step back. After you put in the time and energy into Donna's success, you become a member of the silent society — you don't do this for self-esteem."

No matter what anyone says, Jones refuses to be labeled a victim. She now lives independently, walking to Starbucks every morning at 5 a.m. and traveling coast to coast on her own. Over the past few years, she has had the ability to visualize again, which has dramatically improved her memory.

She has what she calls a "reminder board" that helps her get through her day and an 800 number that Connelly set up for her so that she can call him anytime now that he lives in Indiana with his wife, Kate, and their daughter. She has collected more than 100 photo albums of the people and events in her life, which she uses to help her memory.

In addition, the book has given her new purpose.

"It's been so nice to just walk around the community and have a book to market," she says. "It upsets me when people say, 'What do you do all day?' I do good things that make me happy and help me to get better."

Sarcona adds that it is Jones' sense of humor that helps everyone to continue the healing. Sarcona says that sometimes she will forget details that Jones will be quick to point out.

"I told her we should get her a reminder board," Jones says.

The book has been a cathartic experience for all three individuals. Written in the first person by Connelly, the self-published book had its first book signing May 17 at the University of Notre Dame and a number of other requests for signings have been popping up all over the country.

"I believe this is a must-read for everyone," says Sarcona. "It will inspire and prove to the reader that no man is an island. We need each other."

Connelly says this book is for anyone looking for inspiration.

"When you're challenged, if you surround yourself with people who have a passion for what you believe in and stay committed as a group, you will perform miracles," he says. "The cover of the book is our world. That was our goal — for her to see another sunset. We weren't trying to put lightning in a bottle. We were going by inches."

Jones adds her motto both in life and in the book, "Never give up."

Copies of "One More Sunset" are \$15. All of the proceeds for the book will go toward a trust fund for Jones' continuing recovery. Anyone interested in purchasing a copy may contact Sarcona at 545-7788.