

JULY 29, 2002

# People

**EXCLUSIVE**

## Sharon Osbourne's **CANCER BATTLE**

The star of  
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frankly about  
colon cancer,  
chemo and her  
family's love.  
Says Ozzy:  
'She's my  
whole world'

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"I feel like it's my duty to help kids who are like I was, heading in the wrong direction," says Donohue (at the Brick by Brick center).

# Hard Hat, Soft Heart

A messed-up kid who made millions, Lynn Donohue decided to help others

**W**hen Lynn Donohue drives her kids around eastern Massachusetts, she likes to point out landmark buildings like Boston's Faneuil Hall. This is not just an architectural tour—it's a guide to her past. "I still get a real kick out of saying, 'Hey, look up there at that wall. Nice piece of work, huh?'" Donohue says. "'You should have seen your mom up there on that wall by that pigeon.' I knew I was leaving my mark."

As the first woman member of Bricklayers Local 39, Donohue, 45, left her imprint on many buildings. But she is proudest of a two-story edifice in New



"I knew I had a knack" for brickwork, Donohue (on the job in '81) remembers.

Bedford, Mass., which she didn't construct. There, teenage kids are learning to play keyboards, guitars and drums. Others are learning graphic design or creating volunteer projects. Adults can come to sign up for a course on entrepreneurship. Brick by Brick, a Community Organization is Donohue's passion and her brainchild. It was started with her support and is her way of giving back after making a \$3 million fortune in construction. Says Donohue: "My goal is to use the money I've made and the things I've learned to help at-risk kids who are just like I was."

If any kid in 1970s New Bedford



"I thought my story could help kids," says Donohue (helping Tim swing Kelsey, left, and Daniel).

might have been voted Least Likely to Succeed, it was Lynn Davidian. The third of five children from a broken home, she took her first drink at age 13 and got into Quaaludes, pot and heroin. Dropping out of school at 15, she slept in empty houses, then moved into a hippie commune, where an older friend coached her on how to lie about her age to get welfare benefits. "There was nothing going well in my life," Donohue says. "I felt like I was a loser."

After doing 30 days in jail during a Florida road trip for stealing a jar of peanut butter, Donohue, then 16, was living in an old car. Her father saw her on the street a year later and offered her a bartending job at his saloon. She accepted but had second thoughts after a biker fight in the bar turned ugly. "There was blood everywhere," she says. "I hid behind some boxes and prayed, 'Oh God, don't let me die.'"

To her relief, Donohue was soon laid off from the bar; one day, while waiting in line for her unemployment

check, she saw a poster for a women's construction-trade training course and signed up. In 1979 she began a four-year bricklaying apprenticeship, hoping to earn upward of \$17 an hour. "It was love at first sight," she says of the arduous work. Her enthusiasm for the job helped her give up drugs; a few years later Donohue stopped drinking too. She also earned a GED. While hazing newcomers was a routine practice at the work site, Donohue's treatment bordered on harassment. "Once, someone locked me inside a stinking port-a-john for an hour," she recalls. Still, she never complained about the insults or obscenities. "I decided to use their taunts and put-downs as fuel to succeed," she says.

It worked. Although exhausted after a day's work lifting 50-lb. blocks, the 5'3" Donohue would go home and practice her craft. Each night for a year, she built and unbuild a brick wall in her basement—until she was able to win the union's apprenticeship contest. "She's the only woman who's

ever won," says former union vice president Tom McIntyre. "She's the real deal."

In 1982 Donohue married her husband, Tim, 49, then a custodial worker, and with a bank loan she started Argus Construction. Soon, she was building stores and schools—with some help from her old foes. "She hired a lot of the guys who had given her a hard time," ex-employee Bob Lynch remembers. "She even made some of them bosses. She'd never let a grudge stand in the way."

Today, Tim, a part-time yoga instructor, stays home with Kelsey, 9, and Daniel, 7. "It's a two-edged sword," he says. "I've spent more time with my kids, and that's a joy, but everyone wants to succeed."

In 1997 Lynn sold the assets of Argus and took a high-paying sales job with a brick distributor. She wanted to put her wealth to good use: First came a foundation to help the people of New Bedford, then the community center. Only three months after it opened, it has already attracted 100 kids and 100 adults to its programs; Donohue contributed \$40,000 of the annual \$120,000 budget. "She provides the funding, generates donations, brings in speakers and is the inspiration for what Brick by Brick is all about," says executive director Tracy Furtado. "We have dropouts come here who can relate to her story."

That's how Donohue wants it. "So many of the people I used to run with are dead from drugs, suicide, AIDS," she says. "I consider myself lucky to have escaped. I want kids to know it's a lot harder to fail in this world than to succeed. I've done both, and I know."

● Chris Rodell in New Bedford and Anne Driscoll in Swampscott, Mass.