



Donna Marini: Learning Everything Again Like a New-born Baby

By Sujany Baleswaran

From working at Walt Disney, a career as a bank teller, training as a dental assistant, to life in front of the camera as a model, **Donna Marini** had experienced a lot at just the young age of 20. However, life took a turn for the worst after a horrifying accident just a day before her 21st birthday, leaving her unable to ever walk again. Learning everything again like a newborn baby, Marini was determined to, once again, become the independent woman she once was.

Who was Donna Marini before the accident?

I was born in New Jersey. When I was little, my family took us to New York quite often, and I got to experience things like the Statue of Liberty. I was even able to go in the crown. I also ice-skated in Rockefeller Center and experienced many other wonderful things about New York, more than once. When I was 12, our family decided to move. We all voted on where we would live, and Florida was the choice.

In Florida, I was a dancer and a model. I was a young woman who was always trying to better myself, whether it be through the jobs I worked or how I carried myself. I worked at Walt Disney World. I was a bank teller. I was one of the first Hooters Girls when they started the company in Clearwater, FL. And finally, I was training to be a dental assistant at the time of my accident.



You were only 20 years old when you experienced this life-altering accident. How has your injury shaped who you are today, and how has it changed your perspective of life?

I appreciate everything and everyone in my life. It made me realize how fragile life is. One day you are jumping up, getting in the shower and just running around doing things. Then in a split second, everything can be taken away from you. You always hear, "appreciate what you have because you never know until it's gone." You don't think about appreciating simple things you were born with, like walking, being able to move your arm and legs and put your clothes on.

I now am thankful that I was able to experience all I did in New York and Florida. Now, being in a wheelchair, I could never do that. Also, I pretty much lived a full life before I was 20 years old. People used to think I was crazy, always switching jobs. Looking back, I am happy with all I was able to experience. I'm glad I was always working to grow and better myself.

You had a difficult time adjusting to your new life when you moved back into your parents' home, and no one likes feeling like a burden. How was this period of your life?

It was very difficult because my mom and dad both worked. My two brothers and my sister were young, and when they went to school, I was in their home, lying in bed paralyzed. It was something I could never have imagined. If they didn't take me back in, I would have gone to a nursing home.

They did the best they could. Yet, I needed 24-hour care like a newborn baby that could verbally express their feelings. It was extremely difficult. The great thing that came out of that was I realized I could not live my life this way. Trying to end my life was not an option – no one should do that. Yes, times are tough for everyone, but there is always something or someone to live for. Besides, you might fail and end up worse. So that made me decide no matter how difficult it was going to be, I had to go through this program at a transitional living facility that was going to teach me, a quadriplegic, to live on their own.

The transitional living facility gave you a fresh start, and you achieved so much, learning how to do everything from scratch. Do you remember the moment and the feeling when you first learnt to do something independently again?

Oh, most definitely. Every time I was successful at a new task, it was a huge relief. From early on, just being able to brush my teeth and feed myself was a tremendous achievement. I never thought it was possible, being a C-5/6 quadriplegic, that I would be able to take my own shower, dress myself, get in and out of my wheelchair all on my own, or even learning to drive. All of this was extremely important. I did not want to depend on anyone. It was excruciating, like boot camp for an injured person, but I did it.



You have done modelling work before your injury, and you have also modelled in your wheelchair. How important do you think representation is in the modelling world?

I think it is extremely important to have real people in wheelchairs model and act. It helps with their self-confidence, to let them know that can still live a productive life. And it shows others you are not just in a wheelchair. You are a real person, still active. You are still the same you as before, just sitting.

What are three pieces of advice you would give to women struggling with their confidence and who need that extra encouragement?

Don't ever listen to or let what other people say bother you. I know it is tough, but just take a deep breath and walk away. Everyone is beautiful in their own unique way. That's why we are all different. Always look at what you do have. You can walk. You can talk. You can see. Things will get better. You are just going through a rough patch. You can do it.

You have proven that you can achieve anything with your new business Sunbands. What inspired you to launch this business?

I have always wanted to be involved in business and create something that was mine. Sunbands was born from my repeated action of wearing my sunglasses on top of my head, to hold my hair in place. I had this product idea for many years, but the timing wasn't right to turn it into a business. I even made some prototype designs way back in 2014 but never moved forward. It takes a lot of things to go right, all at the right time, for a new business to become a good investment. During the pandemic, I decided to take another look at my business plan, and this time things fell right into place.