

INTERNATIONAL **BOWLING INDUSTRY**

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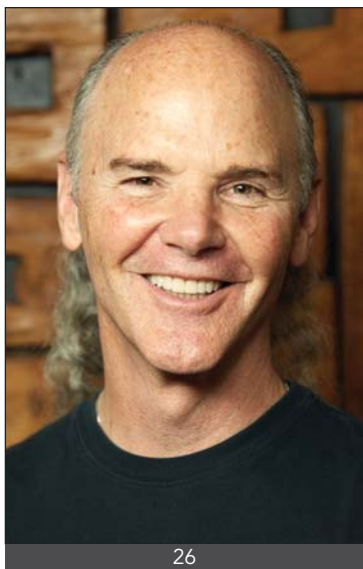
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MEMBER AND/OR SUPPORTER OF:





Donna Connors

THE EXPERIENCE THAT SUPPORTS THE CAUSE

Striking Against Breast Cancer and The Luci Experience are the passion of Donna Connors.

■ By Sean Krainert

Every remarkable event has a story behind it. How it began, the minds that designed it, the hands that built it, the event itself and the end result. But the Luci Bonneau Memorial Striking Against Breast Cancer Mixed Doubles Tournament is not your typical event that marks the time when a task is completed. The Luci is a shared *experience*.

Donna Connors and Luci Bonneau became friends early on in life and were both native Houstonians, a rarity for a large city. They met while bowling in leagues

together, which led to tournaments, and eventually, travel partners on the LPBT.

In 1999, Bonneau was battling breast cancer with family and friends close by, including Connors. The two of them decided that when she finished her treatment, and if she made it, they would start a breast cancer tournament together. But when she passed later that year, Connors knew it was her purpose to carry on their plans and start a tournament.

So on July 27, 2000, Connors partnered with the LPBT to run the first Luci Bonneau Memorial Striking Against Breast Cancer Mixed Doubles Tournament. The program and the tournament sold out and Dynamic Lanes in Houston was full with 64 teams. The tournament raised \$7,000 for the cause, thanks to Connors' mother and her best friend who walked around the center selling tickets and collecting money in Folgers coffee tins. The money raised was then donated to the Stehlin Foundation, a research facility in Houston focused on looking for a cure to breast cancer. Being a success, the tournament ran again in 2001, and sold out again. The event was drawing more attention each year, and bowlers began to come because it was a good, solid tournament.

However, Connors had a bigger vision in mind and knew she had to be true to it. In order to transform the tournament into what she had set out to do, Connors had to take a leap of faith and change the foundation for the tournament. In order for it to thrive, it had to be a volunteer-run event fueled by passion, instead of being fueled by money. By making this big, and difficult, change, it set the tone for the tournament moving forward.

In 2002, Jim Welch became the first volunteer to jump onboard with Connors' plan. He agreed to be the tournament director for the simple exchange of a case of Diet Dr. Pepper at the tournament site each year. "When Donna asks you to do something, you pretty much volunteer. It's not much of an option; it's kind of like getting

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Barbara Chrisman, owner of Storm Products.

drafted," jested Welch.

That agreement sealed the deal, and the Luci Tournament began to move forward and gain momentum at an unstoppable speed. From that moment on, every single person involved in the tournament became an unpaid volunteer. With this established, Conners' mission became the focus for the tournament, and her plan was simple: 1. raise the funds; 2. get the players in the building; 3. run a pro-am. "If I have the players, I have a pro-am. If I have the pro-am, I have the

charity," says Conners. "My event is about the players. I want to give them everything I can and recognize them in every way, because they deserve it."

Unfortunately, like most non-traditional approaches and ideas, it sparked skepticism, a natural response to change. But Conners stuck to her plan. And that plan started with, and revolved around, the players. If the players would come, she knew she would be able to reach her goals. "If you can see it, taste it and feel it, then it becomes reality. It was wrapped up in Donna's head that this tournament was going to be special, and great, and wonderful, and it became that. And people fell in behind her to create it," says Barb Chrisman, co-owner of Storm.

So Conners began by making her own rules that would set the pace for putting the players first. If she wanted to attract the best bowlers in the world, whether professional or amateur, she had to begin by doing something that showed her respect for them. This meant

challenging the traditional rules that put conditions on with whom players could bowl. "The tournament is about the players. They are what make it great. They believe in my charity, and they believe in what I am doing, and they are the ones that make it all happen. I refuse to take an athlete that strives to be great and put a stipulation on them and tell them they can't play," says Conners.

That is exactly what she did. She empowered every athlete, by allowing them to choose to bowl with any other athlete, regardless of professional stature. By making the players the epicenter of the tournament and changing the foundation of the Luci Doubles, the next natural step was the sponsors. In 2002, with perfect timing, Conners met Barb Chrisman, co-owner of Storm, during a tournament, sparking a relationship that would forever change the Luci Doubles, Storm



Keith Cipielewski and Cathy Nelson enjoy the event.



An exemplary duo, Barb Chrisman of Storm and Donna Conners.

and the sport of bowling. "She asked if I could sponsor the Luci [Doubles], shared Chrisman, and I said 'absolutely.' Storm wasn't big then and people just didn't know how to say thank you to sponsors back then. But when I walked into the first Luci tournament that Storm sponsored, Donna had Storm on every wall and every sign. She embraced us. We embraced her. And we stayed involved from that point on, and I made sure Donna was taken care of," said Chrisman.

2016 marks the 17th year of the Luci Doubles, a title event more formally known as the PBA/PWBA /XtraFrame Striking Against Breast Cancer Mixed Doubles Tournament. It is now well known as an unparalleled experience generated by a contagious

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Tina Williams getting ready to bowl.

Doubles with her husband Chris Barnes since 2003.

The fundraising for the cause has come a long way since the \$7,000 collected in Folgers coffee tins the first year. In 2015, \$81,000 was raised for the charity, and 2016 is aiming for an even higher number. Conners created a new 501(c) called the Striking Against Breast Cancer charity. All of the money raised from the raffles and auctions is now donated to The Rose, a Houston-based organization that helps women who can't afford breast care treatment or mammograms, and the Huntsman Cancer Institute, a cancer research center based in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Each year, the prizes become more and more extreme with everything from drones and electric bicycles to large electronics, vacations and concert tickets. But the items themselves are not what generates the excitement at the Luci Doubles. Every year, many players finish their squad only to find the tallest chairs in the house to stand on to sell raffle tickets until the center closes late at night. In some years, players have stripped their shirts off and signed them on the spot for auction, while bicycles were ridden across the approaches to showcase the

Some of the incredible volunteers for the event.

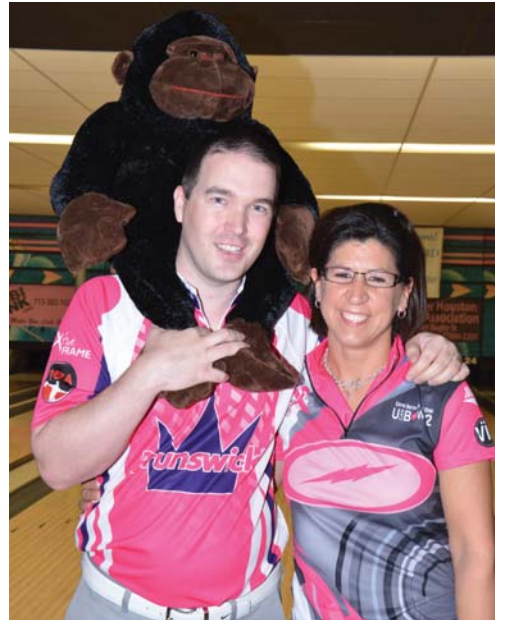


wave of energy that exudes from the hearts and souls of everyone involved. "The Luci is one of the most sought out tournaments in the U.S., and maybe even the world," says Liz Johnson.

Players have noted across the board, that when you walk into the building at Bowl On Bellaire at the beginning of the tournament, it is as if you are walking through a portal that immediately transports you to a charged environment unlike any other. "Initially you enter for the first time, because it is a good tournament. But then you walk in and there is something to the event. You feel the passion, and you feel that bond with the survivors and the charity. There is an air, and I can't wait to be a part of it," says Lynda Norry Barnes, who has bowled in the Luci

raffle prizes. And, it is not rare to see people giving their prizes back, time after time, in order to re-affle to raise even more money. From the time people enter the building, until the last minute of the last day, there are raffles, auctions and giveaways that include every person in the building. "Nobody leaves the building empty-handed," says Conners.

Besides the extravagant items donated for



Players: Sean Rash and Liz Johnson.

the raffles and auctions, the tournament always brings in a new dynamic that keeps the players and participants on their toes. Contributing to that is the tournament's Mystery Man, who in 2012 joined the ranks with the dozens of individuals and businesses that donate funds and items to the tournament each year. However, unlike traditional sponsors and vendors, the Mystery Man is somebody that is unknown to anyone at the tournament. Every year, he donates a sum of money and just before it begins, shares his wishes for its use. "The Mystery Man is so fun. He is in the building the entire time and nobody knows who he is, and he doesn't want anybody to know. He is an exceptional man, passionate about our sport, and he is an awesome bowler. For me to have him on my team, I am pretty honored," says Conners.

A notable moment at every Luci Doubles

FEATURE

tournament is at the beginning of the pro-ams when every person, who has fought or is fighting breast cancer, is asked to go out onto the approach. In most cases, this could be up to 100 people. It is during this time, without a dry eye in the house, that the cause behind the experience is transparent and recognized and respected by every person in the building.

With the funds being raised, and the players in the building, it is the pro-am that carries an unprecedented charge of energy every year. "It's contagious. Donna is contagious. The players who come want to bowl the pro-am. They *want* to do it. They ask what they can do, and you don't see that at any other tournament. It takes something really special to pull that off," Wes Malott shared about his experience with the pro-am at the Luci Doubles.

In 2014, Dino Castillo stepped up to help Conners with the pro-am. "I knew that from running tournaments myself it can be very overwhelming, and I knew she was going to need some help. So I took it upon myself and I told Donna: 'I am here and I am going to help you and you don't really have a choice, so let me handle this,'" said Castillo.



Incredible volunteers, Cindy Starkey, and Bertha Ortiz

Players agree in unison that this tournament, this experience, is the one stop every year that they look forward to. "It doesn't matter if the tournament didn't pay anything. I'm going to be there, because of how Donna is and how she treats her players and everybody else too," says Malott.

Whether a person is there for the fight against breast cancer, the camaraderie with their fellow bowlers, to meet the pro players, to give back and volunteer, or simply to win the tournament, it is all orchestrated by a higher cause, bringing everyone together at the right place at the right time. "This event is operated from higher up. I'm telling you, it is like nothing you have ever seen. There is an energy in that building that you cannot bottle. If we could bottle it in our sport, it would be incredible. It is fun, electrifying and crazy," says Conners.

2016 will mark the first year with four squads, and still a waiting list in tow. Conners set out on a lifelong journey with the Luci Doubles, reaching levels that exceed her goals every year. But beyond her goals, there is the humanity and love that Donna shares with the world. Donna is the spark that drives the accomplishments of the Luci Tournament. "If there were five, ten, fifteen more Donnas in the world, then the world would be a better place," says Johnson. ❖



Standing room only during the tournament.

The Luci Doubles pro-am is just as atypical as the tournament itself. Instead of just assigning the top players to the pro-am slots, the players are strategically placed where they need to be, and sometimes, that means they don't bowl during a pro-am at all. Instead, every year, the players that bowl the pro-am are rotated. If they are not assigned to bowl, they are assigned to represent themselves at the pro-am selling raffle tickets, signing t-shirts and talking with everybody who is there to bowl or observe. "The pro-am is a great time, and all of the players look forward to it every year. And you leave with way more friends than you walked in with every year, which to me is what bowling is truly about," says Barnes.



Sean Krainert is a freelance copywriter living in the San Francisco Bay Area specializing in real estate, hospitality and mental health writing. He is also an alumni of the Wichita State Shocker bowling program.