



building & breaking bonds

International Supermodel Nancy Donahue and Fashion-Beauty Entrepreneur Susan Anton Pasanen

by **Beth Daigle**

photos by **Kevin Harkins**

Looking back, Merrimack Valley natives Nancy Donahue and Susan Anton Pasanen seemed destined to bond. It took awhile, but when the women eventually connected, they easily merged their two impressive backgrounds into one formidable team.

The air of success that surrounds Donahue, a former supermodel, author and actor, and Pasanen, a longtime entrepreneur, comes in a most engaging and unpretentious package. For the better part of five decades, the women have been leading nearly parallel lives, but it wasn't until about seven years ago that they finally crossed paths in a meaningful way.

Today, Donahue and Pasanen are a powerful pair whose business venture, BelleCore LLC, embraces their experience in and passion for things connected to beauty and wellness.

Nancy Donahue's tale is one of rare opportunities and distinct life experiences. Donahue, 52, grew up in a home bursting with activity on Belmont Avenue in the Belvidere section of Lowell. "There were a lot of people around all of the time," says Donahue, one of 11 children. "You learn to live with people, you learn to get along, you learn to survive."

Donahue's father, Richard Donahue, a noted lawyer and one-time aide to President John F. Kennedy, and her mother, also Nancy, were significantly influential in her life. Their contributions to local organizations, hospitals, educational institutions and charities made a lasting impression on Donahue and inspired her to follow in their footsteps. Her mother founded the Merrimack Repertory Theatre (MRT) in Lowell, and when Donahue is asked why her already busy mom was so active in the community, she explains, "It was just her; it is who she is — same with Dad."

Pasanen's parents, Arthur and Madeline Anton, knew the Donahues through social circles, shared their community involvement and their mutual passion for the arts. Pasanen was introduced to the theater at a very young age and was later asked by Donahue's mother to sit on the board of trustees of the MRT, which she enjoys being a part of to this day.

Though Donahue's future in modeling would be glamorous, her life growing up in Lowell was rather typical. She enjoyed much of her time outdoors at Shedd Park or Fort Hill and attended Immaculate Conception School and the all-girls Keith Hall High School, which later evolved into Lowell Catholic High School.

Pasanen also attended private schools in Lowell, despite living in Chelmsford. Her scholastic experiences at the Hellenic American School and at Rogers Hall, also an all-girls high school, had a significant impact on her life.

Donahue's big break came after graduation from Lasell College in 1978, when she was discovered by Mademoiselle magazine. She moved to New York and became one of the first international supermodels. She graced the covers of Vogue, Glamour, Self and Harper's Bazaar, to name a few, and worked alongside top models such as Kim Alexis, Carol Alt, Janice Dickinson and Paulina Porizkova.

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The New York modeling scene was thrilling. “We went to Studio 54 and did it all,” Donahue says. “We were just having fun.” It was an extraordinary time, but not without its challenges. Donahue faced and rose above the trials and tribulations that many young models encounter. “There are a lot of girls out there struggling,” Donahue says. “I got it together, thank God. There are many who don’t.”

While in New York, Donahue married and had her son, George, now 21. After her divorce, she returned to Lowell with George in 1993 and began a new phase of her life. She married Steve Joncas in 2005 and continues to live in the city.

Switching gears from the fast-paced world of modeling, Donahue entered Newbury College at the age of 38 to study culinary arts, and went on to become a pastry chef for nine years at Bianco’s Catering, then located in Chelmsford. “It was fun, creative and hard work,” she says. “I loved it.” Simultaneously, Donahue expanded her passion for fitness by becoming a personal trainer, working with clients throughout the Merrimack Valley at places such as the Lowell and Andover YMCAs and at Gold’s Gym in Tewksbury and eventually becoming fitness director at the

Quail Ridge Country Club in Acton.

Donahue’s determination and work ethic stemmed from her upbringing and childhood work experiences. She started working at 14 and has always loved a challenge. “I was taught to always put my nose to the grindstone,” Donahue says. “And be the best that I can be.”

In the years to follow, Donahue complemented her hard work by taking part in various volunteer programs. She and Pasanen crossed paths when their children attended The Pike School in Andover. They didn’t yet know each other well, but it wasn’t long before their lives would finally collide and lead to what Pasanen refers to as “the perfect storm.”

Pasanen, 56, is part of a tight-knit Greek family. Her father, Arthur Anton, was president of Anton’s Cleaners in Chelmsford, a family business that is now more than 90 years old. Arthur and Madeline Anton, Pasanen’s mother, strove to instill great pride and a sense of professionalism in their four children. Anton’s was a big part of Pasanen’s life and learning while growing up. Her brothers, Charles and Arthur Jr., run the business today.

Pasanen was exposed to other cultures and languages early on.

“Rogers Hall was like its own little world in the middle of Lowell,” she says. This, along with annual summer trips to Greece, were formative for Pasanen. “The exposure broadens you,” she says. “I feel very stable because of the background I have.”

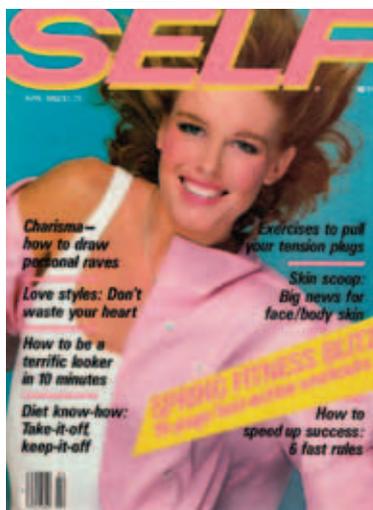
Pasanen’s motivations and entrepreneurial future took shape being part of a thriving family business. She began working at 14 as a counter girl at Anton’s and quickly recognized what it took to run a successful business and how to be the “face” of the company. “You have to be on your game and greet everyone with a smile,” Pasanen says. “It was good training for any kind of job.”

Pasanen enjoyed the work and appreciated the family network it created. “The Merrimack Valley is all about family,” she says, “the businesses you go to, the families who own them and the community spirit. Family is always something you can rely on; it is who has your back and gives you strength.”

Ambition aside, Pasanen also made time for fun, and fondly recalls weekend trips with her sister, Diane, to downtown Lowell. “We would take the bus to Brigham’s for a BLT and black and white frappe,” Pasanen says. “Then off to Bon Marche to do some shopping.”

Pasanen’s well-rounded background and natural business acumen set the stage for her to achieve many goals. She earned an undergraduate degree from Tufts University and a graduate degree from Boston University. She spent time on the West Coast and then returned home to begin working at Lowell General Hospital. She married Dr. Wayne Pasanen in 1978 and had three children — Zachary, Christina and Alexandra. They moved to North Andover in 1982 and continue to live there. Just as Donahue had pursued a culinary career, Pasanen attended what’s now known as The Cambridge School of Culinary Arts and became a freelance caterer for a number of years.

Pasanen’s drive and willingness to explore new prospects — she also worked in the high-end clothing industry for The Worth Collection — helped fuel her entrepreneurial spirit and her compassionate and generous nature, and she began lending her time



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to causes throughout the Merrimack Valley. Given the opportunity to contemplate their similarities, Donahue remarked, “We share the same values, which is why we are phenomenal together.”

The contagious quality of giving would become apparent as the list grew of organizations to which Pasanen and Donahue were tied. Whether a fellow corporator at Lowell General Hospital asked Pasanen to lend a hand on the board of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell or a fundraising event would lead Donahue to the corporators at Lowell General, “It all happens because someone asks as a result of something else,” Pasanen says. What is abundantly clear is that both women share a capacity for extraordinary benevolence.

That capacity was tapped when Pasanen was asked to use her expertise as a high-end clothing purveyor to outfit a charity fashion show to benefit Rape Crisis Services of Greater Lowell, the same event at which Donahue was orchestrating the runway models. At long last, the Donahue-Pasanen connection was solidified. Longtime mutual friend Linda Chemaly was chairwoman of the event. “It was serendipitous that it all came together the way it did,” Chemaly says. “I admire them and consider myself lucky to be their friend.”

In the following years, Donahue and Pasanen would continue to get involved with many of the same groups, charities and organizations, mirroring the philanthropic nature of their parents. Though it may seem like they ventured hand in hand to each destination, they were, in fact, just two women on independent tracks with the same desire to contribute to the community from which they hailed. “We are just out here trying to help the sisterhood,” Pasanen says.

Donahue and Pasanen also have shared businesses interests, and these days they are taking their intelligence, enthusiasm and understanding of self image and improvement to the masses via a product called the “HoneyBelle bodybuffer,” a hand-held device

that smoothes and diminishes the appearance of cellulite.

Despite their many career successes, philanthropic roles and contributions, Pasanen and Donahue both say their proudest moment was when they became a mother. “Giving birth and watching them grow,” Pasanen says. “There is nothing like it.”

It’s all about roots for these well-grounded women who, Chemaly says, have “never lost sight of the important things in life.”

“It comes back to family,” says Donahue, “and the Merrimack Valley is a village that wishes us well.”



The HoneyBelle bodybuffer

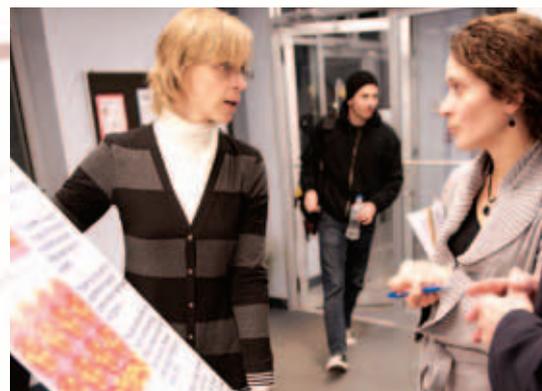
The “HoneyBelle bodybuffer” is a device created to battle and break the bonds of cellulite. Nancy Donahue first became aware of the concept through a personal training client whose surgeon had provided a similar tool to help smooth the appearance of scar tissue. Donahue saw the device’s potential for many applications, from massage to skin exfoliation, and shared her enthusiasm with Susan Anton Pasanen. Pasanen’s initial experience with the device was so positive that her entrepreneurial instincts promptly kicked in. Particularly impressed by how it reduced the appearance of cellulite, she began brainstorming with Donahue about how to get a product to market.

Pasanen and Donahue partnered with Dr. Heidi B. Kummer and Dr. James J. Pomposelli in 2007 to form BelleCore LLC and develop the HoneyBelle, a hand-held, motorized unit designed to stretch and break the fibrous cords that contribute to unsightly cellulite in as few as five to 10 minutes, two times a day.

I tried out the Belle and loved its noninvasive nature, and the idea that it could soothe sore muscles while smoothing skin tone was a bonus. I had learned previously that deep tissue massage could improve the look of cellulite, so it made sense that a product like this could work. The fact that bathing suit season is right around the corner made it even more irresistible.

My personal experience using the buffer has been positive. After about three weeks of regular use I have noticed a smoother, more youthful appearance.

Acquainting myself with the device didn’t take much time and I found it simple to use and comfortable to handle. It only took two or three sessions before I felt entirely at ease with the process and its powerful motion. The trick to success, I determined, was repetition — the more I used it, the better the results.



Top: Susan, Nancy and Dr. Heidi B. Kummer hosted a presentation of the HoneyBelle bodybuffer at Fitness for You in North Andover. Middle: Dr. Kummer explains to writer Beth Daigle the science behind the bodybuffer. Bottom: Nancy demonstrates how to use the device for massage as well as skin exfoliation.

For more information:

www.BelleBodyBuffer.com
www.NancyDonahue.com

