

BY MICHAEL J. MCDERMOTT



# Dynamic Duo

An entrepreneurial couple keeps two businesses—and a family—humming

**f**ranks and beans, Laurel and Hardy, yin and yang—some things just go together naturally. But television postproduction and high-end kitchen design? Surely that's got to be one of the most unlikely pairings in the annals of entrepreneurship. That the partnership works is all the more amazing considering the bona fides of the two individuals behind the respective ventures.

Laura Douglas, president and owner of RedEye Professional Post, a boutique television post-production company located in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, is a native New Englander who admits to a fondness for simplicity, an aversion to risk, and a pro-

pensity toward careful planning. Chris Donaghy, managing owner of Kitchen Brokers LLC, a custom-kitchen design and remodeling consulting firm based in Mason Neck, Virginia, hails from Michigan, favors flashy over simple, has never met a risk he didn't like, and believes that spontaneity trumps careful planning every time.

Oh, one more thing: These hard-driving business owners are married to each other, have a daughter, Cassidy, who's a first-grader, and share a life philosophy that emphatically puts family first.

Douglas and Donaghy could be poster children for that old saying about opposites attract-

ing, but they make it all work by harnessing their creativity and applying it to everything they do in both their personal and professional lives. Even a cursory glance at those lives suggests that nothing but such a richly creative approach would stand a chance of success.

### Time Share

Douglas sits down to be interviewed for this article at midnight. It's the only time slot she has available after a seemingly endless day editing "a crazy series of political and network television spots," she explains. Despite the late hour, she'll be back in her office at 9 a.m. for a conference call with a

documentary producer in Romania, to discuss a trailer that the aptly named RedEye is creating for the documentarian's entry in the upcoming Sundance Film Festival.

That is by no means an unusual schedule for Douglas, and it's made possible at least in part by Donaghy's strategy for Kitchen Brokers. A newly minted MBA facing a dismal job market in the early 1990s, Donaghy today describes himself as "a kitchen designer by fluke." He took a job at a home center to keep the wolf from the door 15 years ago, just about the time computer-assisted kitchen design systems were being introduced. He learned the tech-

nology, worked his way up through the ranks for eight years, and got to know the kitchen design and remodeling business from the inside out.

"At the end of my eighth year, I took a buyout from my general manager's job to start my own company, Kitchen Brokers," he relates. "I wrote a business plan that has withstood the test of time. In short, the plan said family comes first. That meant I would work from home, keep my overhead low, and never overwork."

### Dad on the Run

Oh, so he's a stay-at-home dad, something that's not so unusual these days. That's how they

make it work, right? Not quite. There's much more to it, but the foundation rests on sharing philosophies of life that mesh in a unique way. Donaghy and Douglas both wear multiple hats nearly all the time.

"To many people, I am a stay-at-home dad," Donaghy, who despises being categorized, acknowledges. "But I also run a successful company full-time, as does my wife. We trade off our roles several times a day. On non-school days I stay home in the morning taking care of Cassidy while returning emails and modifying designs. I'll take Cassidy with me to a job site at 11 a.m., then drop her off at Laura's office at noon so they

can have lunch while I visit another job site. Then I pick up Cassidy, run errands, and go home for another hour or two of paperwork.”

If Donaghy has an evening appointment, Douglas comes home or they do another “handoff.” The two communicate constantly regarding pickups and drop-offs for Cassidy, appointments with clients, household chores, etc. Cell phones, Donaghy says, have become “a dreaded necessity.”

**Mutual Support**

Such a partnership approach to child-rearing and family matters might seem almost a necessity, given their respective professional lives, but Donaghy and Douglas extend the same philosophy to their glar-

ingly disparate business worlds. “One of the most important aspects of our two-career family is the constant support of my husband,” Douglas says. “Even when I don’t like to hear what he has to say, he always has my back.”

Having each other’s back means tapping each other’s strengths in matters related to business as well as family for Douglas and Donaghy. “We are very tough on each other, but we need it,” Douglas says. “Truth is, I would not have taken the chance on starting my own company without his constant support, dreaming and pushing to make it happen. He is the one who made me see it was possible, and he is always there to support and encourage.”



What makes it work is that it’s a two-way street, of course. While Donaghy may help Douglas with marketing or press releases, or simply by acting as a sounding board for new ideas, she reciprocates in ways such as applying her diplomatic nature to help him find solutions to dealing with difficult customers. “We are lucky because we are working in two completely different industries, so there are no jealousies or arguments about how we work or run our companies,” Donaghy says.

Both agree that constant communication—about even the most mundane aspects of their lives, private and professional both—and unselfish cooperation are the linchpins to making their creative

approach to their partnership work. “Call if you’re working late, pick up milk on the way home, take out the trash without being asked, schedule appointments around family requirements, show pride in each other’s accomplishments,” says Donaghy. “Include the family in business decisions, share all financial news, include each other in planning, network for each other, and always celebrate each other’s achievements,” adds Douglas.

**Flexibility Pays**

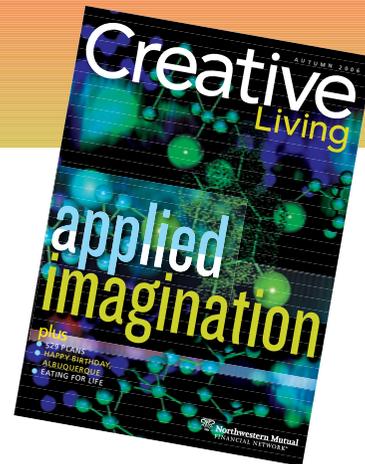
While the challenges of their unique lifestyle can be significant, the payoffs are enormous. “Our lifestyle is so flexible. We’re not tied down to two weeks of vacation each year, we

don’t have to count sick days, and we’re beholden to no one,” Donaghy proclaims.

“We have so much more flexibility than the conventional two-career couple,” Douglas agrees. “My business tends to soar when his is slow, and vice versa. The way we live our lives is dependent on creativity. It may not be simple, but it’s well worth it, and we wouldn’t have it any other way.”



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## Creative Lives

In Chinese philosophy, yin-yang, symbolized by a circle divided by an S-shaped line into light and dark segments, represents the harmonious interaction of the female and male forces of the universe. The life partnership between Laura Douglas and Chris Donaghy appears to be a fruitfully creative example of yin-yang in action, but each partner is also a truly creative individual in his or her own right. For example:



**LAURA DOUGLAS**

Founded RedEye Post with the purchase of her own editing suite and gear from her former employer. Launched her venture at the nadir of the post-9/11 business downturn and persuaded a banker she’d never met before to finance most of it—in just 24 hours. Identified what she considered “fatal flaws” in her former employer’s business strategy, developed solutions to them—and made those improvements the basis of her business plan. Recently launched a new venture, American Lives, in partnership with David Pepper, to chronicle the lives of ordinary people—and developed it into a new television series.

**CHRIS DONAGHY**

Has been employed since the age of six, at jobs including, but not limited to, newspaper delivery boy, gravedigger, waiter, warehouse worker, janitor, playground attendant, coach, ski instructor, small business consultant, and babysitter. While in college started a company called Omni Services, which did “anything and everything—painting barns, delivering kegs to fraternity events, writing résumés, catering parties, giving back rubs—whatever it took.” The proceeds paid his tuition and rent and gave him “the itch to always work alone.” To save the cost of renting showroom space, negotiates deals with wine stores, offices, granite suppliers, and other businesses to put Kitchen Brokers displays in their space. “They get the use of our beautiful furniture at no cost to them, and I’m able to showcase my products to a captive audience.” Identified an emerging niche and positioned Kitchen Brokers to fill it. The company, often featured on HGTV, is now the sole “green” kitchen design firm on the East Coast, and sustainable kitchens account for more than half its annual sales.

Mike McDermott, a freelance writer specializing in business and technology, lives in Carmel, New York. Businesses profiled in this column are clients of the Northwestern Mutual Financial Network. Douglas and Donaghy were nominated by Network Representative Chad Harlan.