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hearing life

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Disrupting Adversity

*Health Care
CEO Pulls
Purpose
From Pain*



Disrupting Adversity: Health Care CEO Pulls Purpose From Pain

BY FABIA D'ARIENZO

"I am convinced that success should and must serve as a catalyst to help others and create a better, more equitable society where no one is neglected or forgotten."

Donato Tramuto called in for our interview from his iPhone—in a car in Manhattan, on his way from media interviews at Nasdaq to another at Bloomberg. It was the afternoon before he'd ring the Opening Bell at the Nasdaq MarketSite in Times Square as part of its annual Wellness Week.

As I listened to him answer my questions—which he heard with the help of hearing aids controlled with a smartphone app—two things struck me:

- 1) How far technology has come in making it easier for people with hearing loss to function in a hearing world—Donato initially lost most of his hearing as an 8-year-old; and
- 2) How far the human spirit can take us.

Hallmarks of Success

By any standard, Donato J. Tramuto has accomplished a lot.

He's the CEO of Tivity Health, Inc. (Nasdaq: TVTY)—a billion dollar plus company that provides nutrition, fitness and social engagement solutions. Its brands include SilverSneakers, Nutrisystem, Prime Fitness, Wisely Well, South Beach Diet and WholeHealth Living.

He's founded two companies; been the CEO of other businesses; serves on numerous boards, including for Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights; was honored with the Robert F. Kennedy Ripple of Hope Award and others; holds four honorary doctorates; and has launched two nonprofits: Health eVillages, which provides mobile technology, including medical reference and clinical decision support, in areas where health care is desperately needed but tremendously difficult to access; and the Tramuto Foundation, which makes resources available to individuals and communities in need through scholarships, grants and collaborative partnerships. *The New York Times* has even deemed him “a global health activist.”

No doubt, Donato's CV of accomplishments is extraordinary—if not intimidating.

But if you take a moment to scratch the surface—and get the chance to talk to the man—you'll quickly learn that his path to getting where he is today hasn't been easy. To the contrary. It's been riddled with what he calls bulldozer moments—those times when life simply plows you down, and to survive, you must find a way to get up and move on.

Left: Honoree Donato Tramuto speaks onstage at the RFK Ripple of Hope Gala at Hilton Hotel Midtown on Dec. 16, 2014, in New York City. Photo by Mike Coppola/Getty Images for RFK Ripple of Hope.

“I don't want to leave this world with people thinking my legacy was starting a business. I want them to know my legacy has always been to help people.”

In a quick minute, you'll also realize that what he values most doesn't come from a title or business credential—although for Donato, these are extremely important tools. What he values most, he'll tell you, is the mark he hopes to leave behind—and the people whose lives he hopes to make better.

A Humble Start

Donato grew up in an Italian-American family in a small industrial town in Western New York. He was one of six surviving children of first-generation Americans.

Starting at an early age, life hit him hard with a series of heart-wrenching challenges that tested his strength and spirit.

In his book, *Life's Bulldozer Moments: How Adversity Leads to Success in Life and Business*, he lays out his vision for the future of health care in America and his business philosophies—like the concept of integration over innovation, the power of data, and the belief that addressing the social determinants of health has become a business imperative.

But the book also reads like an honest conversation—one in which Donato reflects on those bulldozer moments in his life that challenged him, toughened him, defined his values, and shaped his sense of purpose.

In the book—and in my conversation with him—a deep faith, strong principles, and an understated-but-stubbornly-strong determination also jumped out, perhaps explaining, at least in part, his capacity to persist in the face of adversity.

Even for the reader, the trials that he's faced feel reeling:

- In a matter of months, just as his father was struggling to hold onto the family's clothing store, his mother suffered through a stillbirth during which the doctor put the traumatic decision before his father: your wife or the child; his grandfather, who lived two doors down, was nearly killed when shot by an armed robber on his driveway; and Donato began experiencing severe ear pain—the result of ear infection that would take nearly all the hearing from his left ear and a significant amount from his right, setting him on a years-long path not only of medical appointments, intrusive and painful treatments,

and experimental surgeries, but of being viewed and treated like a failure.

- When Donato was 11, his much-loved, extremely supportive big brother Gerald died in a car crash. Four years later, his sister-in-law Rosemary—who had a master’s in speech pathology and took Donato under her wing—died during childbirth when she had a fatal allergic reaction to the anesthesia.
- Just three months after Rosemary’s death, Donato underwent his fifth experimental ear surgery—first on his left ear and shortly thereafter on his right—which kept him heavily bandaged and on bed rest with restricted movement for nearly two months. But the surgeries were successful, allowing him to regain a significant amount of hearing. But because the fix was temporary—although it held mostly for 20 years—he’d lose much of his hearing again in his 30s. Another prolonged infection set in after a surgery to reconstruct his left eardrum, and the wrong antibiotic delivery approach was prescribed.
- There were other losses and adversity. And by Donato’s own account, a pivotal point came when he just escaped becoming a victim of 9/11 when, at the last minute, he changed his flight due to a toothache. But after a weekend visit at Donato’s home, his two longtime friends and their young son boarded the flight out of Boston that he’d rescheduled. They died when the plane hit the South Tower



Donato holds siblings Valerie and Geoffrey while on a trip with his foundation Health eVillages to Lwala, Kenya. With the help of a Health eVillages tablet, the children’s mother was diagnosed and treated for preeclampsia during her pregnancy.

“Rosemary’s death and my own experiences in the health care world kindled and drove in me a desire to make health care safer, more accessible and better. It gave me my ‘why,’ my purpose in life, and kept me moving forward each time obstacles blocked my way or events knocked me down. ... My need to overcome obstacles, to prove the naysayers wrong, to earn my parents’ pride, and to realize my own potential, drove me forward despite losses and challenges that might have defeated me. ... But having a purpose in life pulled me to my feet every time I got knocked down.”

of the World Trade Center. It was in their honor that Donato started the Tramuto Foundation. And it was the result of that bulldozer moment that his conviction to make a difference in the world hardened.

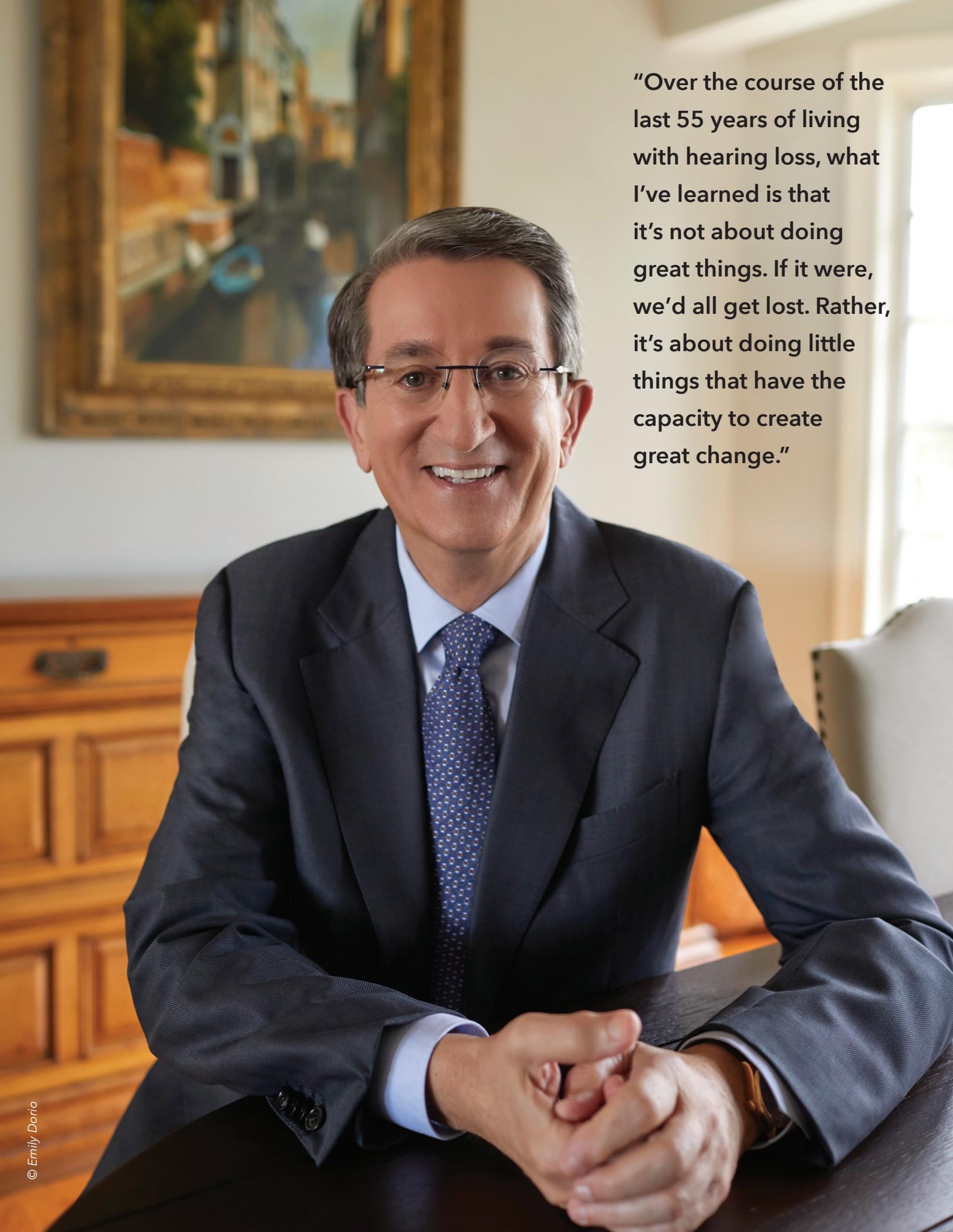
In reading his book, it struck me how more than once tragedy took from Donato those very individuals who seemingly provided his greatest emotional support and comfort as he struggled as an isolated kid with hearing loss. Nor was he spared his childhood heroes—John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.—whose words he continues to return to today for enlightenment and courage. Each time one support was yanked away, he had to become a master at finding another.

The Golden Nugget of Adversity

During our interview, Donato said to me, “My story is a story—no better or worse than anyone else’s.”

Yet, his story gave him his purpose and spurred valuable business and philanthropic undertakings.

In forcing him to experience so many sides of life, perhaps his story has also given him fuller perspective, deeper empathy, and greater awareness with which to leave behind a brighter, more enduring, and profoundly positive legacy. **HL**

A man with short, graying hair and glasses is sitting at a dark wooden table. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a light blue shirt, and a blue patterned tie. He has his hands clasped on the table and is smiling warmly at the camera. In the background, there is a large framed painting on the wall and a window on the right side.

“Over the course of the last 55 years of living with hearing loss, what I’ve learned is that it’s not about doing great things. If it were, we’d all get lost. Rather, it’s about doing little things that have the capacity to create great change.”

Intercepting Loneliness

Donato Tramuto doesn't beat around the bush: He was a lonely kid. His hearing loss—which initially went unrecognized and unaddressed for many months as a second grader—isolated him. What's more, throughout the years before a specialized surgery partially repaired his eardrum and restored some of his hearing—his speech and enunciation suffered tremendously. The combined communication challenges made connecting with others extremely difficult.

Following the 1972 surgery, it took him years of speech therapy and dedicated, painstaking practice to bring his articulation to where he wanted it to be. Recording his voice and playing it back over and over again to correct himself were part of his daily routine as a 17-year-old teen growing up in Dunkirk, New York—and for many years to follow.

Now, as an articulate health care industry leader with a penchant for data analysis, Donato recognizes that loneliness and social isolation too often sabotage health and well-being. The obvious toll is human suffering. After all, people are social beings, and

- Hearing loss has been linked to loneliness. The odds for developing severe or very severe loneliness significantly increased by 7% for every decibel signal-to-noise ratio drop in hearing in adults younger than 70, one study showed. (Nachtegaal et al., 2009)
- Social isolation is equivalent in risk of premature death to smoking 15 cigarettes per day. (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010)
 - Social isolation increases the risk for:
 - Coronary heart disease (29%) (Valtorta et al., 2016)
 - Stroke (32%) (Valtorta et al., 2016)
 - Dementia (40%) (Sutin et al., 2018)
 - Mortality (29%) (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015)



Donato Tramuto, CEO of Tivity Health, is driven to improving health outcomes and reducing medical costs by advancing cutting-edge approaches to health care access, drug safety, and addressing the social determinants of health. Here, he's with Nan Smith, a dedicated SilverSneakers member, on her 103rd birthday.

when we perceive a lack of social connection, we suffer deeply, researchers explain.

But the cost can be measured in health care spending as well. Simply, people who experience chronic loneliness and social isolation are at greater risk of health issues and complications—from heart disease and stroke to depression and dementia. Social isolation even increases the risk of early death.

A Particularly Vulnerable Population

Resolute that loneliness and social isolation are under-recognized and increasingly menacing social determinants of health that must be addressed, Donato set out to do something about them. And he chose to focus most intently on a very vulnerable population: those aging in rural areas.

According to Donato, there's an accumulation factor at play among this older population, which makes them all the more susceptible. For example, an older individual who lives a good distance from a town center might lose a spouse, no longer drive, live on a tight fixed income, struggle with mobility issues; adult

“When I was eight years old, I lost most of my hearing and endured years of bullying, failure, and painful isolation. For years I kept my story to myself but have learned that we only end loneliness by sharing our stories, making ourselves visible (and vulnerable) to others.”

children might move away; friends die. Add in that these rural areas often are underserved. Circumstances pile up.

Now consider that unaddressed hearing loss is high among this population and can compound an individual's sense of isolation. Half of people 75 and older have disabling hearing loss—along with nearly a quarter of 65-to-74-year-olds. In rural areas specifically, 36% of older adults live with hearing loss.

What's more, just as people often don't want to admit they have trouble hearing, they often hold back from telling anyone they're lonely. Left to fester, these co-occurring conditions can dramatically impinge on health and quality of life.

Taking Decisive Action

As CEO of Tivity Health—and through his nonprofits Health eVillages and the Tramuto Foundation—Donato has taken up the mic to speak out on behalf of this population. He's urging other leaders in health care and business, policymakers, researchers, educators, advocates, activists—anyone who can make a contribution—to integrate capabilities and collaborate on effective solutions.

In fact, Tivity Health has been hosting an annual Connectivity Summit on Rural Aging since 2017, bringing together the experts across diverse disciplines on how to address social isolation, improve the well-being of older Americans, and empower aging adults to live their best healthy lives—replete with access to physical activity, food security, sound nutrition, social engagement and human connection.

Donato is particularly proud of Tivity Health's SilverSneakers program, which has been up and running for more than 27 years. Available through many Medicare Advantage insurance plans,

“We will all be bulldozed by adversity at some time in our lives. Those bulldozer moments can and will utterly destroy happiness, ambition and even a sense of self. Yet search the earth that has been bulldozed and find a golden nugget in the rubble.”

SilverSneakers offers free access to nearly 18,000 fitness locations across the country—along with specialized fitness classes. The program enables nearly 16 million older adults to be physically active several times each week in safe, supportive environments.

But SilverSneakers isn't just a gateway to the health-boosting benefits of exercise. It also opens the door to positive social connections—which we now know are so important for well-being and healthy aging. Simply by participating in SilverSneakers on a regular basis, participants create the kind of ritual that some experts say helps bridge human connection. In fact, a study by the MIT AgeLab—in conjunction with Tivity Health—found that older adults who participate in SilverSneakers are significantly less socially isolated.

“It is my passionate belief that none of us should be invisible or overlooked,” Donato emphasizes.

It's in that spirit that he led Tivity Health to announce that 2020 is the year it will tackle social isolation and loneliness head-on. **HL**



How Loneliness and Social Isolation Play Out on Health

Researchers believe that social isolation and loneliness are tied to higher inflammation and reduced immune response. Inflammation is linked to a wide array of chronic conditions. And reduced immune responses make people more susceptible to communicable diseases. This may explain why these social issues have such broad negative health consequences.