

MITCH McGRATH ♦ RANDLE TWIGGS ♦ LON EMERICK

DIRT

LATE MODEL

Magazine

Darrell Lanigan and Jimmy Owens both hit the desert with new teams, but left with the usual result, **VICTORY!**



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LON EMERICK

OUT OF THE DARKNESS...



INTO THE LIGHT

BY DOUG KENNEDY

Born and raised in Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania, a town just 10 miles from DuBois, Pennsylvania, and its dirt-covered race track, Lon Emerick's goal was to race a Dirt Late Model. But with tracks in the area at a premium, Emerick settled for working on the Big-Block Modified of driver Guy Griffin and the Sprint Car of Andy Paden. Finally he decided, at the age of 39, that it was time to fulfill his lifelong dream of racing a Dirt Late Model or forever hold his peace.

"I wanted to race and wanted to go fast," said Emerick. "I grew up watching Late Models and I thought it would be a blast to race them one day. The set-ups on race cars came easy to me, so it didn't worry me when I bought my first Late Model. I thought I would pick everything up very quickly, but I couldn't have been more wrong. This is my third year and I still don't feel like I have a good handle on it, but I feel like I'm getting closer."

Now 42 years old, Emerick just completed his third season of racing at Sharon Speedway. He ended the 2014 season with a very respectable sixth-place finish in the Late Model point standings.

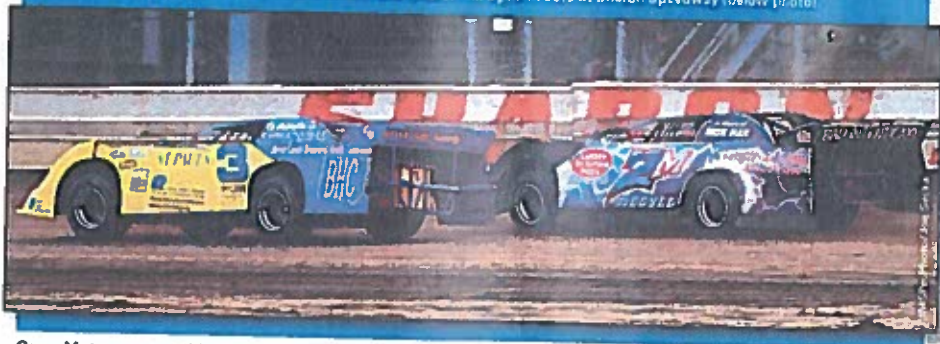
With the help of Griffin, Emerick learned what it takes to run a race team. His learning curve turned out to be rather steep, made steeper by that fact that, for the most part, he is a one-man show leading up to race day. He does all of the work in the shop by himself and the same is true once that preparation is done. He gets the race car to the track on his own, unloads it solo, gets ready to race, races and does all the work in between with three friends — me, myself and I.

"I'm a true one-man operation," Emerick allowed.

With the involvement of Crate Late Model racing, and specifically the RUSH Series, Lon was able to budget his money so that he could do what he dreamt about for years. On a school teacher's salary, Emerick didn't have the financial backing to buy a \$30,000



Lon Emerick in action last season (above photo) and again in 2013 at Sharon Speedway (below photo)



Open Motor nor an additional \$15,000 for a car and trailer. Without a doubt, racing creates a huge challenge for Lon Emerick.

In his younger days at DuBois High School, Lon was a pretty good athlete competing in football, wrestling and baseball.

"I made the football traveling team as a sophomore," said Emerick, who played as a defensive end and an offensive tackle. Following his graduation, he attended California University of Pennsylvania where he majored in technology education designed to help him become a shop teacher.

Working at Reynolds Junior and Senior High School since 1996, teaching metal shop is something he really enjoys.

"I like the variety and it is hands on, plus I don't have to

lecture all day," said Emerick. "The STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) program at the school is new and a work in progress. We have a 3D printer, a laser engraver and a vinyl cutter. We have a school board that is seeing the future and investing into the program."

Emerick is also investing in his own future and hopes to have his master's degree in school counseling by the end of 2015 from Westminster College.

"I guess it's me getting older," he said. "I hope it will give me a better understanding with kids, to see what they are going through and to be able to give them advice. I never want to come across as an expert because I'm not."

Racing and teaching aside, there was another huge concern

that went to the forefront of Lon Emerick's life in the early 2000s and that came in the form of depression - one so severe that he even contemplated suicide.

"It's hard to explain because my head was so cloudy," said Emerick, referring to his mental illness. "I remember being miserable and easily agitated. I felt that it wasn't me that was the problem and that everyone else should just leave me alone. I remember saying to people that there's not one thing I do that someone else couldn't do 10 times better, so I might as well not even be here. I felt like I was just a waste and shouldn't even be breathing."

Depression for Lon can be described as taking a day when nothing goes right and stretching that out over a couple of years.

"It's like you just can't take

it anymore and it's not easy to be around yourself," he said.

He also remembers that he would drive around super fast, hoping that he would crash and die in an accident. That way it wouldn't be a suicide - something he thought would take him directly to Hell.

"I would see how many days I could go without sleeping or eating and I drank a lot and did everything I could to destroy myself."

Emerick got the idea of putting information about mental health on his race car when he attended a training session for the Reynold's student assistance program a little over two years ago. The two-day training session awakened him to just how many different services there were out there for people who needed help.

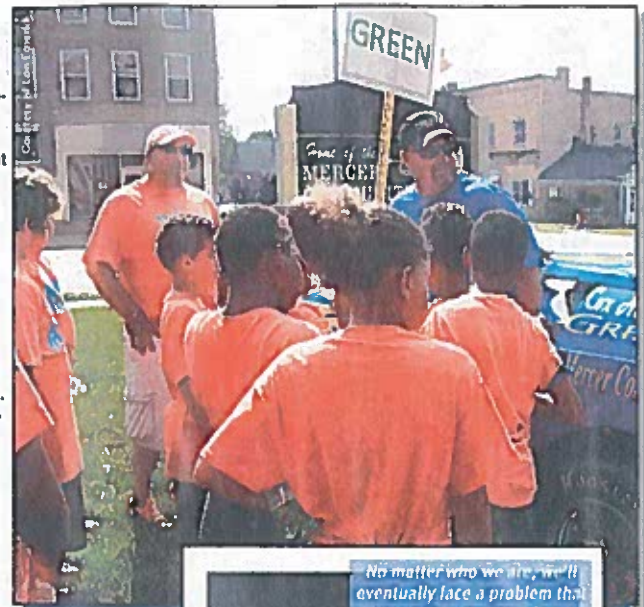
The sponsors on his race car aren't your typical decals, but ones that represent the facilities that are involved with the program. Those facilities include Value Options Behavioral Health, Community Counseling Center, The Primary Health Network, United Way of Mercer County and UPMC Horizon. Emerick hopes to have "Stamp Out Stigma" as his entire theme for 2015.

For Emerick, creating awareness of depression is tantamount to taking his first checkered flag. So to spread his devotion to the cause, he drives the "Stamp Out Stigma" RUSH Late Model #3.

"I thought it would be a good way to get those messages out there by being a sponsor on my car," said Emerick.

The "Stamp Out Stigma" program was developed to make people aware of the stigma they attach to mental illness and substance usage disorders.

It is his goal to bring suffering people out of the dark and to make them aware that it's okay and imperative to seek help. For those who have mental illness and know there's help available and don't seek it, Lon simply said, "That's sad." The mission of the Stamp Out Stigma (S.O.S) program is to reach 1,000,000 people to change perceptions and reduce the stigma of mental illness by encouraging



Above photo: Lon Emerick during a 2013 appearance flight photo Promotional poster for Emerick's Stamp Out Stigma campaign. He promotes that recovery is possible for those suffering from depression and other forms of mental illness

No matter who we are, we'll eventually face a problem that we can't overcome alone.

Get up with depression ruling the life, RUSH late model racer driver Lon Emerick sought help to recover from this very common form of mental illness.

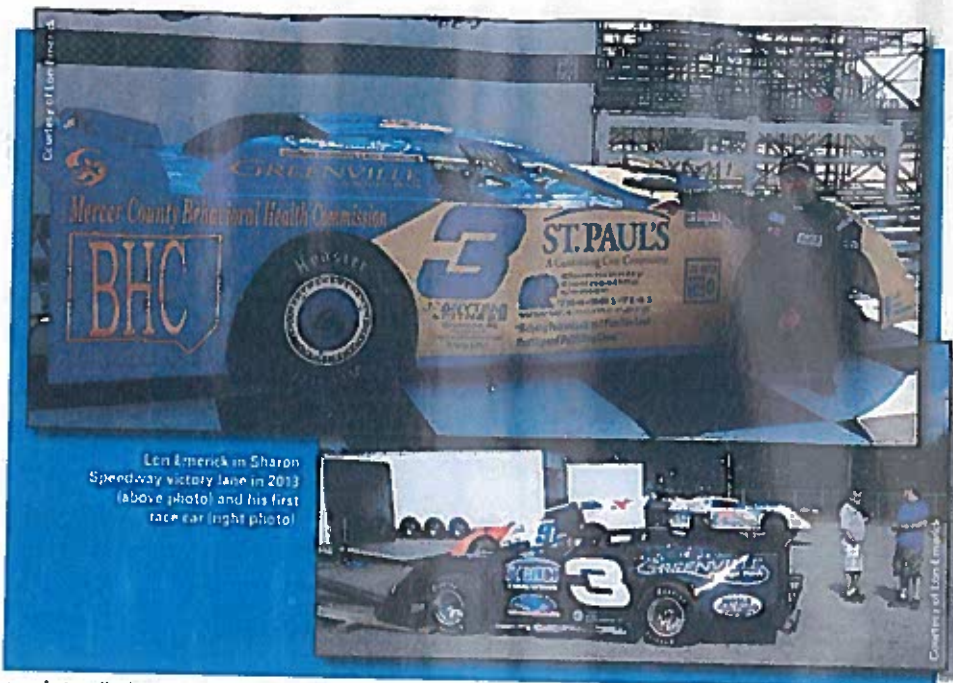
STAMP OUT STIGMA

Did you know that **one American out of every four lives with a form of mental illness?**

Call 7-1-1 for resources in your community, or call 9-1-1 for a crisis situation.

Recovery is Possible!

Community Counseling Center | United Way of Mercer County | BCC | Sharon Regional Health System | UPMC Horizon | Primary Health Network



Lon Emerick in Sharon Speedway victory lane in 2013 (above photo) and his first race car (right photo)

people to talk about them.

"Lon has made an incredible statement with his life and career to help others living with mental illness to get the help they need to recover, which is the heart of S.O.S.," said Abigail Santmyer, Director of Corporate Communications for Value Options Behavioral.

Although somewhat nervous about it, Emerick will be one of the speaker/presenters at the annual Mental Health Conference hosted by the Mercer County Behavioral Health Commission in May of 2015.

"I've never spoken to anyone for an hour, but I agreed to do it," said Lon.

During his days of depression, Emerick found a number of so-called "friends" who distanced themselves from him when he needed the help and support. That list, unfortunately, includes his parents as well.

"They just didn't know what to do," he said. "Because of their upbringing, they did the best they could, I think, but I always felt judged by them. I still do most of

the time."

They did, however, along with his girlfriend at the time, help save his life during a very dark moment in which he intended to end it all.

"I called my parents to tell them that I was not a coward, but I had to do something," said Emerick who at the time was working at the school.

When he eventually walked out of the school, there were cops who handcuffed him and waited for an ambulance to arrive, so that he could be transported to Sharon Regional Hospital. It was during a subsequent three-day stay at the hospital that Emerick realized that the problem he had was indeed him. As he said, "the light bulb finally went on."

"I remember sitting there and realizing the problem was me and wondering how did I get here to begin with," said Emerick. "I became determined to get back to the way I was."

He also met a counselor, Sue Burke, who he credits to this day for helping him shake the depres-

sion. "I refer to it as rebuilding myself," he said.

For the next three years, Lon made it a point to go to counseling two or three times a week.

"I have to admit there were some bumpy times along the way." Those bumps included some relapses as well.

He also is very proud of the friends who have remained with him before, during and after. That list of friends includes Griffin, Ed DiRaimondo, Jim Shuttleworth, Matt Zamperini, Matt Postlethwaite and Eric Witherite. There are others in racing, which even though they aren't friends of Lon, have helped him through some difficult times at the track by adding their support. One who fits that bill is Late Model driver Will Thomas, Sharon Speedway's 2014 season champion.

"He encouraged me not to give up and keep trying," said Lon. "He said he would help me out in any way he could. That meant a lot to me."

As for Griffin, Guy had this to say about Lon Emerick: "He went

through some really tough times. He is the type of person who will go out of his way to help someone. I'm just an ordinary person trying to help somebody."

Support also comes from his wife, Heidi, and his two kids, Noah and Maggie.

Don't worry about what other people think about you, because your friends won't think anything about it and the people who do think differently aren't your friends anyway is Emerick's philosophy.

In addition to his personal life moving upwards, racing is also on the uptick for Lon Emerick.

"No feature wins yet, but hopefully in the future," he said. "I would like to have the funding to go race a lot of different places, so more people see the car and get the message, but I haven't had the luck yet."

He says that getting into wrecks and having mechanical problems early in the 2014 season held him back and caused him to run out of funds. By July of this past year, he was pretty much tapped out until a July 5th race at Sharon Speedway where he found a set-up that seemed to work.

"Before that race I was changing things on a weekly basis for two and a half years, but after that, it felt better," he said. And it showed on the race track as well, as he was beginning to run some pretty competitive lap times.

"I had an old car with a welded frame, a right rear tire that had at least five or six race nights on it and a left rear that I was using from the previous year." He says the checks he received from Sharon in 2014 afforded him the opportunity to buy a couple of new rear tires.

As he looks back to those dark days, Lon has this to say, "I'm very aware of the things that can bring me back down and I avoid them like the plague."

The road to recovery has been a long and tedious one for Transfer, Pennsylvania, resident Lon Emerick, but to date a successful one. Let's hope that same road will lead to success on the race track as well.

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