



How Apprentice star Joanne battled back after death crash

TOUGH: Her baby's dad was killed when she was 17

By Geraldine Gittens

A GUTSY young entrepreneur who has overcome incredible challenges in her personal life is now hoping to wow Bill Cullen in the boardroom.

Tough-talking Donegal woman **Joanne Sweeney-Burke** became a single mother at just 17 when her first love was killed in a car crash.

Her daughter Sophie was just five months old when her dad, Henry Cullen, was killed along with two friends in 1996.

The businesswoman brought up her daughter alone and still managed to graduate from NUIG with a degree before achieving a research Masters in journalism

SUFFER

And despite finding love again with her husband Tom - Joanne has been dealt another blow when he began to suffer with health issues.

Joanne's life was turned upside down back in 1996 when the car crash killed Sophie's father. A source said: "He was killed along with two other guys in the car. She was there that night, and was going to go into the car, but she was waiting for her boyfriend to leave the two guys home and then she'd go home with him.

"They'd been together for a couple of years and he was her first big love."

"Sophie was born in September and she then went back to school to do her Leaving Cert the next September. And in college she had friends helping her and watching Sophie. They babysat for her.

"It probably did change her. It was a tough time for her," the source added.

Joanne made her TV debut on Monday night as a candidate on **the Apprentice** where the project manager on her

team, Zest, commended her - in front of Bill Cullen - for her sales skills.

Owner of a multimedia agency Media Box, Joanne worked on local radio in Donegal before landing a job as CEO in the Letterkenny Chamber of Commerce, which locals say she "turned around."

Friends in Donegal say she was forced to grow up very quickly as a teenager, and even now she has been a support to her husband Tom, who has had health issues over the past year.

The close source added: "Tom has been in hospital a couple of times last year but he's not too bad now.

"They've been together 10 or 11 years, and met when they were both in Galway."

ATTITUDE

One former colleague told the *Herald*: "What she had to surmount between the time she was 16 and 21 I'd say her attitude is, if I can get over that, I can get over anything. She worked her ass off."

"She went to college and brought Sophie with her. When other students were drinking and out on the town, she was in lectures the next day with Sophie on the seat beside her.

"She took her baby with her when she was two years old to university, whereas most people would say I can't do both.

"When Henry died she was literally left a single mum."

Tom and Joanne's child Bobby was born on the same day as Sophie, September 14, which her family says is one of the many coincidences in Joanne's life.



CHALLENGE: **Joanne Sweeney-Burke** (33), with her Apprentice competitors, is hoping for success on show