

This dedicated **Cam**eraman



North Andover's **Steve D'Onofrio** enjoys national recognition for his work on **'This Old House'**

By KELLY BURCH

Chances are, you've seen a project that Steve D'Onofrio worked on. After all, this is the man who has spent 14 seasons with the popular PBS home-improvement show, "This Old House."

If you're not a fan of "This Old House," however, you've probably still been witness to his productions. Ever flipped through the North Andover Community Access television station and paused to watch a St. Michael's church service? You've seen his work. Watched a Knights football game? You've also seen his work. Watched one of the many "This Old House" spinoffs? Steve again.

You'd expect a local television celebrity to look familiar to you, but D'Onofrio works his magic from behind the camera. This North Andover resident is the director of photography for "This Old House" and often shoots film for North Andover Community Access and Media, where he is currently the president of the Board of Directors.

Although he is involved in many aspects of television, if he's doing his job right, you won't even consider his existence, let alone recognize his face.

"I try to get the audience as immersed as possible," D'Onofrio said. "You never want them to remember that they're watching TV. You want them to be the third person in the room."

The Andovers recently caught up with D'Onofrio, 53, at the community access and media offices at North Andover High School. He discussed his work on "This Old House," and shared his infectious enthusiasm for the ➤

Steve D'Onofrio has worked on 'This Old House,' on PBS, for 14 seasons.

Photo by DESI SMITH

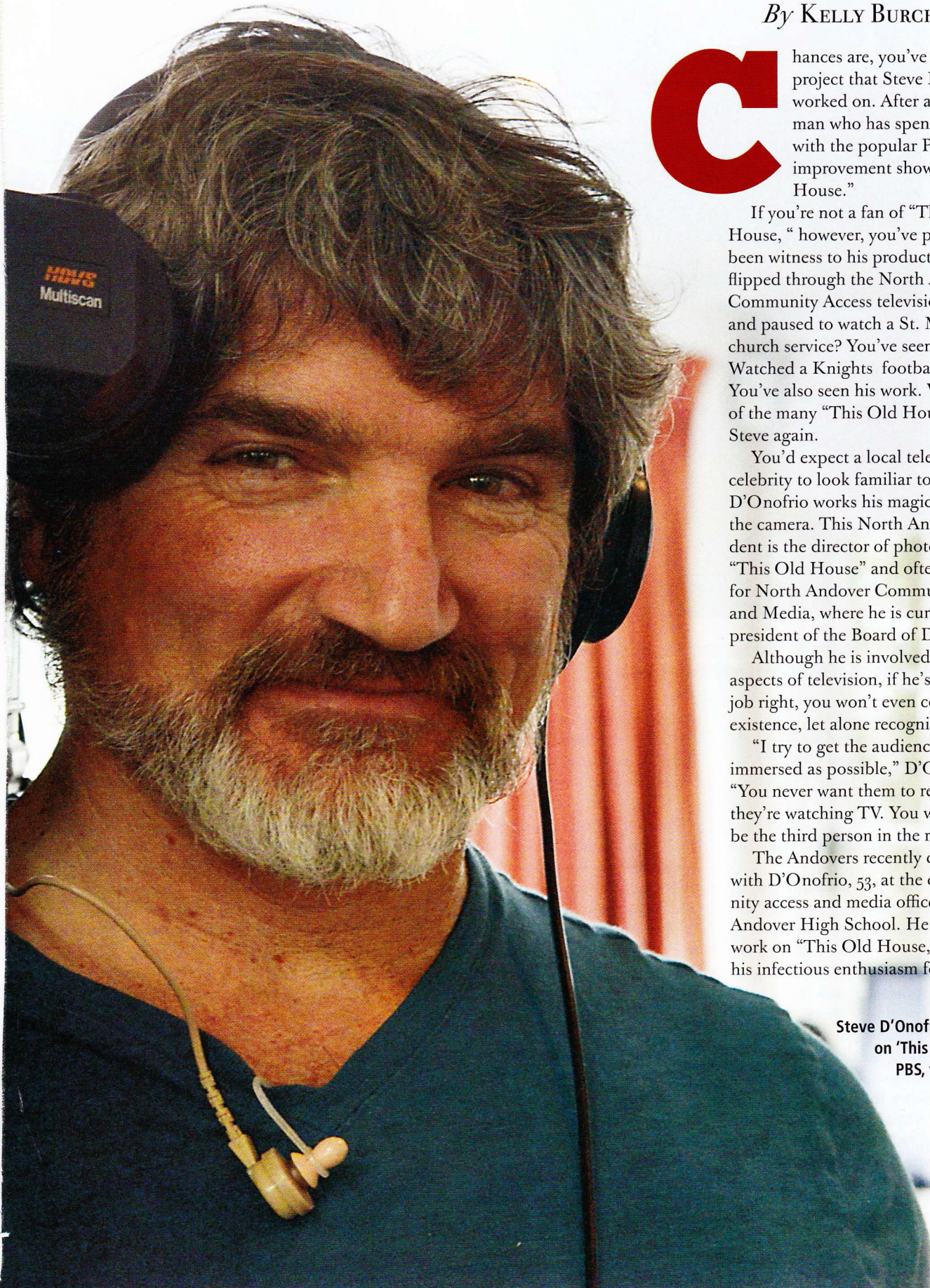




Photo by DESI SMITH

From left, Joe Battista, lighting director for "This Old House," Steve D'Onofrio, director of photography and Keith Musinski, designer, work on a home being restored in Essex. The property was featured is "This Old House" this spring.

community access station.

"I like to come down and be in touch, and just be present," he said of NACAM. "We tell people to stop by and show you care. It's a fun atmosphere here, and you always spend more time than you thought. You get immersed. I set the time, then exceed it."

D'Onofrio's love for community television began when he was in his 20s. He was doing an internship for the town of Winchester, when his uncle called to say that the local cable station was having an audition for a sports announcer.

"When I went down there, it was a couple of cameras and (an editing) deck or two, but I looked around and thought 'Wow, this is awesome,'" he recalled. "I just started having fun with it. It was a great way to work with great people. There were high-school aged kids, adults, and everyone was just having fun."

The sense of community at local

access stations endures today, but when D'Onofrio started behind the camera, he faced a problem that few people could relate to now.

"If you stuck a camera in people's faces, they would freak out," he said.

D'Onofrio didn't let the lack of willing on-air talent get the best of him. Instead, he became increasingly involved with the community access station and realized that he loved the camera. Working at community access stations was a great way to build skills and connections, he found.

"Today, I've produced for Comcast, SportsNET and other national sports programs, and every shoot started in local access," he said.

Despite D'Onofrio's success as a professional cameraman and respected industry leader, he still loves his time at the community access station.

"Since I started in local access, I have

been blessed with the most fantastic people," he said. "You make your best friends when you do something together."

The platform gives D'Onofrio the chance to highlight groups that are benefiting the community, too, he said. He enjoys covering local events such as parades, often with his son Niko, 15.

"As I tell people, he's interviewed dignitaries: the Board of Selectmen and, of course, Santa Claus," he said. "For me, filming local events is my way of giving back to the town. And it's very artistic being down there at the parade. It's so visual."

D'Onofrio said he always tries to put children on TV and to offer all the organizations involved a chance to promote their upcoming events.

"There are a lot of groups who are giving back to the town. It's a combination of promoting them, and I always give a call to action. Give people a reason to not

STEVE'S TIPS FOR HOME RENOVATIONS

After working on "This Old House" for 14 seasons, D'Onofrio has learned plenty about renovating. Although he has seen many projects, he still hesitates when friends and family ask him for renovation advice.

"That's the most terrifying question I'm asked," he said.

D'Onofrio was, however, willing to give The Andovers a few pointers that will apply to any project:

1. Get multiple quotes, and ask for references. If your friends can recommend a contractor, even better.

2. Make sure your contractors are insured.

3. Know your budget, and know your wiggle room. Nearly every project goes over budget. Expect to add 15 percent to any budget as you encounter unexpected expenses along the way.

4. Tackle a big project first. For example, if you're doing an addition, dedicate your budget to building it as big as you want. You can always add finishing touches later.

5. If you're recruiting your friends to help you, have food and drink on hand. But, he warned, **"Beer comes at the end of the day."**



Photo by AMY SWEENEY

Steve D'Onofrio, second from left, with North Andover Community Access station staff members Cary Friedman, Tiffany Begin and Brian Fraser. D'Onofrio is president of the Board of Directors.

Morash, offered Larry a job as a laborer on the set of the young show. D'Onofrio recognized his chance to break further into television.

"When the original cameraman left, I said to Larry, 'Get me on the set. Hang up and get me on the set.'"

Morash gave D'Onofrio an audition ("because I was Larry's brother"), but hired a different cameraman. It wasn't until about four years later, when the show was looking for a change of direction, that D'Onofrio was called back in.

"It was literally one of those leap for joy moments," he said.

One of D'Onofrio's first projects was in Key West, Fla., where "This Old House" was doing a project. One day the crew was driving along and D'Onofrio was trying to not become overwhelmed by his new job, which was about to get even more challenging.

"Russ looked at me and said, 'Are you afraid of heights?' And I said 'Would it matter?'"

Soon, D'Onofrio found himself hanging out of the side of a helicopter, getting aerial shots of the house and The Keys.

"We're over the water and I'm looking straight down. All I had was a little footrest," he recalled.

This was the first of many times D'Onofrio would need to go the distance to get the shot. Since that day, he

has found himself in most any vehicle imaginable, he says. He is often wedged in tight places with the show's plumber, and he certainly isn't afraid to get dirty.

Once, D'Onofrio was shooting in Italy and recognized a great shot of a castle's roof. When he asked to go to the top, the local guide tried to talk him out of it. D'Onofrio insisted. When he got to the top of the spire, D'Onofrio saw that he was right about the view, but hadn't considered the pigeons. He needed to balance on a board to avoid stepping deep into bird droppings.

"But you don't know that when you look at the shot. That shot was beautiful," he said. "That's the glamour of TV."

When he started filming for "This Old House," D'Onofrio began a steep learning curve, in part because of a director who didn't hold back his opinions.

"Russ was the Bill Parcells of television," he said, referencing the former Patriot's coach who was not afraid to speak his mind. "The biggest compliment I ever got from Russ was complete silence."

Despite, or perhaps because of, Morash's strong opinions, "This Old House" reached levels of success that were hard to dream of when the show started. It began as a one-time series in 1979, and now has won 17 Emmy awards and inspired a plethora of

just sit at home, but to get involved," he said.

D'Onofrio focuses on highlighting the work of others, but his own commitment to his community does not go unnoticed.

"It's just this ingrained part of him," said Brian Fraser, executive director of NACAM. "I'm blown away by his love for making TV. It's impressive and reminds me that it's an art. He enjoys the community aspect, and the creative aspect, and encourages others to do the same."

Passion is great, but it doesn't pay the bills. Meanwhile, television is a notoriously hard industry to break into. In D'Onofrio's case, a little luck went a long way in helping him move from community access volunteer to nationally recognized cameraman.

His brother, Larry, was bartending on Nantucket, and as he later said, "making good drinks for my future boss."

When the summer ended, that boss, "This Old House" founder Russell

home-improvement television programming. D'Onofrio has been nominated for eight Emmy awards himself.

"The show is a real testament to Russ Morash," D'Onofrio said.

Although "This Old House" was revolutionary at the time for bringing television out of the studio, the ingredients for a successful show are the same no matter where it is shot, D'Onofrio said.

"You need a story and drama. You need to see everything that goes wrong, and see the expression on the people's faces," he said.

D'Onofrio said that the homeowners make "This Old House" compelling.

"These are real-life problems," he said. "It's the most stressful thing you've ever done. We're coming into a house and literally tearing it apart, and you're spending more money than you've ever spent in your life."

After 14 seasons, D'Onofrio knows what to look for from the homeowners.

"At one point they always have the same look on their faces," he said. "And it says, 'What have I gotten myself into?'"

When he isn't focused on the homeowners, D'Onofrio has an eye for detail.

"The money shot for me is a lot of little details," he said. "I am always asking, how do I make this shot better?"

Subtle changes that the audience may not even notice can really improve a shot, he said.

D'Onofrio's business card lists him as the director of photography and audio tech for "This Old House," but this is an understatement. D'Onofrio is the photography and audio departments. He shoots the entire show with a Sony 900 high-definition camera ("a camera that can get me out of trouble") and records his own audio.

As he is filming, a wireless transmitter sends the shots to the directors so that the video can be reviewed immediately.

"If all of us look at each other and like a scene, we'll move on," he said. "But if we feel that a scene can work better, we'll do it again."

D'Onofrio said that people should be able to watch his projects and understand the show with the audio turned off, just by following the visuals.

"I try to give the editors too many great shots," he said.

Keeping the audience engaged is no small task when most viewers have hundreds of other entertainment options at their finger tips.

"The audience has the most powerful tool — the remote or computer mouse. So we have to be entertaining and inspiring," D'Onofrio said.

When D'Onofrio isn't filming for "This Old House" or volunteering at community access, he can be found at home in North Andover with his son Niko, 15, and his wife of 18 years, Deborah.

"I've still got a wicked crush on her," he said. "We still hold hands."

Sometimes he even relaxes on the couch and finds himself at the other end of the television production spectrum.

He keeps quiet about his opinions on shows for Deborah's sake. "Internally I'm dying," he said. "Although I do the same to all my own work."

It may be hard to turn the critic off, but there are some shows that are so good even a television producer can enjoy them.

"I love NCIS, because it is just so beautifully lit," D'Onofrio said. "Pawnstars' is a great combination of history and personality. I can't see any staging on that show. It's just fun, and I like how it's shot."

Just like he does not shy away from the camera on his day off, D'Onofrio doesn't avoid home improvement projects either.

"I like to do a big project every year, and get myself into a bit of trouble," he said

He's willing to give DIY a try, but also knows when to call in the experts.

"If it's the kitchen sink, I hire someone," he said.

Years of working around home renovation have taught D'Onofrio to proceed with caution.

"Nothing is impossible, but everything takes time and money," he said. "You never know what you're getting into."

Similarly, D'Onofrio said you never really know a place until you've lived there.

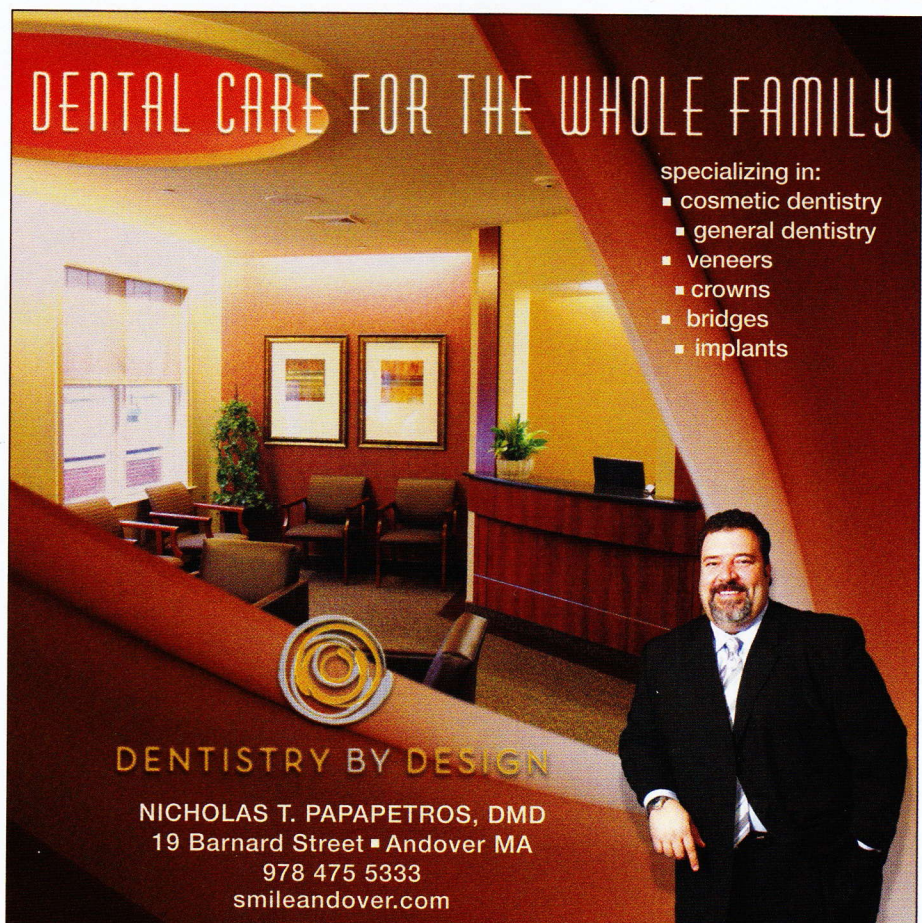
"You see places, and hope," he said.

For the D'Onofrios, The Andovers ended up being the perfect place to raise a family.

"Anything you need in the world is here," he said.

Rather than worrying about whether his son is safe playing outside, or if he will have an easy transition to high school, D'Onofrio can focus on spending time with great friends in the area.

"It reinforces that we made the right decision moving here. For all the reasons I talked about, I could do a forever here," he said. **A**



DENTAL CARE FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

specializing in:

- cosmetic dentistry
- general dentistry
- veneers
- crowns
- bridges
- implants

DENTISTRY BY DESIGN

NICHOLAS T. PAPANETROS, DMD
19 Barnard Street ■ Andover MA
978 475 5333
smileandover.com