Weekender photos/DONNA TALARICO

Falling for the Weekender

By DONNA TALARICO
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Before the Jump, 12:00pm

Who would have ever thought a girl who is afraid of flying and falling would participate in an activity that encompasses both? Certainly not the girl who answered yes to Kristie, Weekender GM/Editor, when asked if she wanted to skydive as part of a new local reality TV show, Dreams 2 Reality.

I'll admit it. I am scared. Totally frightened by the thought of dropping out of an airplane. But I'm getting old, and should be adventurous while I still have a semi-daring bone in my body. (Of course that bone is about the size of half a metatarsal) So, this is the new me, the brave, gutsy Weekender correspondent who will prove her dedication to journalism by doing anything to chase that story, even if it means traveling at over 100 miles per hour through the air to catch it. I may even get a rush out of it, and want to go back again. (I'll let you know later this afternoon.)

I guess you could say I am getting some support. My mom thought I was joking. "You won't even go on a roller coaster!" My 10-year-old brother Joey thinks I will definitely poop or pee my pants and then cry all the way down. My 9-year-old sister Shannon asked, "What if you get hit by a plane?" I told her, it was just a little airport, meaning there weren't a lot of planes, but she still had a rebuttal. "But Donna, then what if you get hit by a little plane?"

My boyfriend and friends think it is cool I'm doing this, and are genuinely excited for me. Some even say they admire my bravery. Of course, inside I know I'm not really that brave and I just have to do it to follow through. Maybe I will make them proud, or at least myself.

To ensure my safety and suppress any qualms, I did some research on the sport and asked everyone I know who has skydived what it was like. I found out that we go up 10,000 feet, about two miles above the ground. I will be tandem, which means I'll jump attached to a pro- A Guinness Book of World Records pro, I'll add. We free fall at 125 mph for about 30 seconds, and then the chute opens (right?) and we float down for about five to ten minutes.

The Jump, 4:00 pm

After taping a segment of the show at the Woodlands, myself and my fellow jumpers, KRZ's J.J. and show co-creator, the Woodlands' Mitch Kornfeld, and the D2R crew headed to the Hazleton Municipal Airport to meet the staff at Above the Poconos Skydiving.

After watching a video overview of the jump and hearing all of the legal ramifications, we signed the releases and had a brief hands-on, classroom training session from Darlene Kellner. We learned exit technique and proper form for the free fall, and practiced several times. Then, we got suited up in jumpsuits and harnesses. My suit made me look like Rainbow Brite. J.J. went up first, along with Mitch. After seeing their smiles upon landing, it was now my turn to fly.

Before loading into the small airplane, my instructor Don Kellner and I practiced the proper exit technique a few times. Then, it was take-off time. The plane was tiny and six jumpers, myself included, sat close as any six people could be. I was next to a transparent door that looked like flimsy plastic, but was assured it was stronger than steel. During the ride up, I was a nervous for the mere fact that I had no parachute on and, once again, was against the door. As part of the routine, you do not get attached to your instructor until you reach 7,000 feet. If that door were to fly open, I was a goner. During the ride up, Don and the pilot decided to have a little fun with me by dropping the plane. I let out blood-curdling screams that were caught on video, but laughed it off afterwards.

Upon reaching 10,000 feet, about two miles above Hazleton, the door flew open. I was pretty scared by the gushing wind, but surprisingly at the same time I was quite calm. Darlene, my photographer and videographer, exited the plane and hung out by the wings to capture the moment. Then, Don, to whom I was now safely hooked, and I scooted up. Then I put my knees out one at a time. Rather than jumping out, as most think you'd have to, you fall when the pilot tips the plane. Before I knew it, I was plummeting toward the ground at 125-miles per hour. I was absolutely loving it!

Darlene was falling right in front of us taking pictures and I was so focused on giving a thumbs-up sign to her, that I couldn't even tell I was falling. The wind was pushing me up as I was going down, so it felt like I was floating, as if I was just laying on the air. There was no falling sensation at all.

We covered 5,000 feet in about 30-seconds when the colorful parachute-built-for-two opened, slowing us down to 15-mph. The pull of the harness hurt a little, but it went away once I looked below and saw little anthills of houses, cars and trees. Amazing! And, it was so quiet. No noise of cars passing, not even any birds chirping. It was just the most peaceful place I have ever, ever, been. In fact, I was so taken in by the beauty of the earth below and the serenity of the air above that I felt like it was not real.

"Don, this feels like a dream!" I screamed. Now I know why he has made over 33,000 jumps.

While floating down to the grassy airport landing area, Don handed me control of the parachute and we practiced landing. We even did a few corkscrews, which made me a little dizzy, but was fun. A few minutes later, we reached the ground and smoothly landed on our rear ends.

"That was so freakin' awesome! I did it! It literally was a dream!" I yelled to everyone.

Now, I can be honest. I was completely freaked out about this story assignment. It was so easy to say, "I'm going skydiving on Tuesday", but when Tuesday came, even though I was a nervous wreck I had to go through with it. But now, I am totally at ease about skydiving and can say I dared to do something extreme, something not many dare to do. If anyone thinks they are too scared to skydive, please take my advice and do it anyway. From the moment the door of the plane opened, any fear I had was replaced by excitement, confidence and accomplishment.

A special thanks to Don, Darlene, Harold, Rob, Dave, Tammy and the rest of the Above the Poconos Skydivers crew for training, packing the chute right, encouraging us, getting us safely up…and of course, down. And, thanks to Dreams to Reality for making this gal's dream to do something totally wild come true.

IF YOU WATCH

-Catch the action of our skydiving experience on Dreams to Reality Sunday, October 13 at 11:30 on the WB38, and again Friday, October 18 at 2:30 a.m. on FOX 56

-For more information on Above the Poconos Skydivers, visit www.welcome.to/skydiving, or call 1-888-654-PLAY. During the winter months, they jump every weekend.

-To make your dream come true, fill out the form in the Weekender.