

The family affair of skydiving

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published September 16, 2015

The Buffalo News online

At 13,000 feet, Joe Eberhardt surveys a checkerboard of Western New York's landscape from the cargo door of a Cessna Caravan. He has leaped from planes before, more than 5,300 times, but his heart still races, tingling with excitement.

Preparing to jump in tandem with a first-time skydiver strapped to his chest, he yells, "Are you ready," holds up a camera to snap a few keepsake photos, then screams "Ready, set, arch!" rocking on each word before falling forward from the plane. In a whoosh, he is swept into a vista of open sky, tumbling, weightless as he hurtles back to earth.

From that altitude, free falls lasts approximately 50 seconds, and free fall is what Eberhardt, 52, loves most about the sport. Considering his experience and average fall times, Eberhardt calculates that he has spent nearly 64 hours — approaching three full days — in free fall.

"It's hard to explain what free fall feels like," said Carol Gath, Eberhardt's sister and a veteran skydiver who has made more than 3,200 jumps. "It's like flying. Once you learn control of your body, you can go forward or backward or do flips. It's all aerodynamics. You forget you're falling."

Yanking the ripcord, the parachute deploys, and everything slows down. Four minutes later, Eberhardt executes a perfect landing on the drop zone at Hollands International Airport in Wilson.

What began as a weekend lark has morphed into a family tradition for Eberhardt, who skydived for the first time as a 25-year-old in Homestead, Florida. Gath and Eberhardt made their initial jump in 1988.

"Carol had been living in Key West, and I was there helping her build a deck," Eberhardt explained. "A group of workers talked about jumping, so we made the drive up to Miami and both jumped for the first time. The moment I left the plane was amazing." Eberhardt paused, savoring the memory. "I can still feel it in my chest 27 years later."

A Hamburg native, he returned to Buffalo and connected with Frontier Skydivers in Wilson to begin training in earnest. He met veteran jumper Ed Gath, whose father once owned a jump site in Arcade. Although a year younger than Eberhardt, Gath had more experience, having made his first skydive at 15.

When his sister returned to Buffalo, Eberhardt convinced her that she needed to jump again.

“You’ve got to meet my jump master,” he told Carol. “You’ll love him.”

Carol took the endorsement to heart. They began dating and married in 1992. Today, at 56, she is one of the most experienced female skydivers in Western New York. Ed has even more jumps. He stopped keeping a log — which most skydivers do religiously — after tallying close to 6,000.

Eberhardt later lured his wife, Laura, into the sport. She has jumped more than 600 times.

In this family, connections to skydiving run deep.

“It’s been such a joy to have my family with me,” Carol said. “My kids grew up on the drop zone. So did Joey’s kids. When you get into the sport, it becomes obsessive. It’s important to spend time with people you love.”

“I get to jump with my wife and brother-in-law and father,” Ed Gath grinned. “Who else gets that?”

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Before kickoff of the Buffalo Bills home opener last fall, in front of 71,000 screaming fans, Eberhardt sailed into Ralph Wilson Stadium beneath a spanning 300 square-foot parachute reading “USA.” Emotions ran high. It was the first game after Bills’ owner Ralph Wilson’s passing, and there was speculation whether the team could remain in Buffalo. Adrenaline pumping, carrying a giant American flag, Eberhardt landed only feet from the 50-yard line to wild, raucous cheers.

This wasn’t the first time he landed at the stadium. In October 2011, during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, four parachutists touched down — and all of them were related. The team featured Eberhardt, Carol and Ed Gath, and Ed’s father, Paul. Carol flew a pink parachute

with the breast cancer awareness symbol, landing with the game ball. It was especially poignant for the family because Paul's wife, Linda Gath, is a breast cancer survivor.

Skydiving is a sharp contrast to Eberhardt's day job as a math teacher at Frontier High School in Hamburg. Muscular and fit, hair swept back to his collar, he appears younger than his age. Eberhardt teaches pre-calculus and statistics. Students don't perceive him as a wild daredevil. In the classroom, he is respected for his even temper.

"You have to smile when you're around him," said Julia Hackford, 18, a recent graduate. "I've never seen him mad. He has a kooky, fun personality. When we learned about limits, he showed a clip from the movie *Mean Girls* where they said 'The limit does not exist.' We all cracked up."

Eberhardt confesses to being a control freak, and his students agree.

"He has to write perfectly on the board," Hackford said. "When he wrote something that wasn't straight, he'd erase and write it again, sometimes more than once."

Being in control translates well to skydiving safety.

"A little fear before each jump is a good thing, because you never want to lose your edge," Eberhardt said. "That's where you become dangerous."

With his experience, he radiates calm, cracking jokes as he boards the plane.

"Part of that comes from my instruction," Eberhardt agreed. "I pack my main parachute and my reserve. I wouldn't jump if I thought it was dangerous. I can push the envelope as much or as little as I want and still be safe. Really, I was born at the right time to be a skydiver. In the late 1980s, skydiving came of age. The materials and design of parachutes evolved."

Until the 1970s, parachutists used a round swatch of fabric that seems primitive compared to modern technology. Landing was dangerous and imprecise. Today's ram air parachutes are sleek and mobile. An adept skydiver can touch down in tight spaces. Parachutes are stitched together in back and pitched downward to create the effect of an aircraft wing. Newer fabrics like "Zero Procity" are tear-resistant, lightweight nylon that forces air around the parachute rather than through it. By the 1990s, parachute lines that had been 1/4-inch in diameter shrunk to 1/8-inch, allowing for greater aerodynamics.

"Round parachutes gave way to a sleek flying machine," Eberhardt said. "I got involved with the sport at exactly the right time."

There have been other high profile demonstration skydives as well. As part of a group who touched down at Coca-Cola Field to celebrate Independence Day, Eberhardt was last to descend. Fellow skydiver Henry Szczepanski landed before him brushed dust off the pitcher's mound as a challenge. Eberhardt thought, "Why not?" Adjusting trajectory, he aimed there, meeting the rubber with both feet — a perfect landing in front of 19,000 fans.

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Skydiving is expensive. New skydivers pay \$250 per jump. The biggest obstacle to first timers, however, is overcoming a fear of heights. Veteran skydivers balance the adrenaline rush with cautiousness and safety. Even then, there are risks.

Eberhardt's most frightening moment came on his thirteenth jump. He remembers the date — October 14, 1989 — and speaks in hushed tones, dubbing it "The Famous Thunderjump."

"There was a storm over Lake Ontario all day long, but it was moving from west to east," he recalled. "The cloud base was at 5,000 feet, so everyone was going below that then making skydives, opening parachutes around two or three thousand feet. Just short free falls. I was a student with limited experience. But we believed conditions were safe. We saw the roll cloud building, but it looked like it was at the shoreline, five miles from us."

Everyone elected to jump before the storm hit. Eberhardt was last to leave the plane. He opened his parachute, then noticed the experienced skydivers below were deploying parachutes much lower than he had. Several spiraled to build speed and reach land faster.

"The roll cloud was moving fast. It was like a monster coming at me," Eberhardt said. "I considered releasing my new parachute so I could free fall below the cloud and open my reserve. But I had a system that would automatically pull the reserve if I released the main parachute."

Once he was engulfed by the cloud, hell broke loose.

"It was violent. I knew I had jumped at 2900 feet, but my altimeter said I was at 4200 feet. I thought it wasn't working. The wind was pushing me up. I couldn't comprehend that."

Once he escaped the cloud, he spotted the drop zone. Turning toward it, he was pushed backwards by fierce winds.

“I kept telling myself that I was going to live,” Eberhardt said. “I was blown four and a half miles off course. I aimed for a field, then went back into the wind and knew I’d have to find a different landing spot. I thought maybe I’d hit a tree or cross power lines. Finally I saw farmlands and a man chopping wood. From about 200 feet above, I started screaming at him.”

A woman driving a parallel road had followed Eberhardt’s plight. The moment he landed, she pulled over, jumped from her truck, and sprawled onto his parachute so it would not re-inflate.

“I was yelling to her, don’t get up! Don’t get up!”

Skydivers from the drop zone spread out in cars, watching the sky, searching, concerned about about his well-being.

“I learned there were two full planes of skydivers, and seven people were missing,” Eberhardt said. “I really believed someone was going to be dead, but everyone made it. One guy had a broken femur. He went to his reserve, which at the time was a round parachute, and slammed into the ground. Then his parachute re-inflated and he was dragged through a fencepost.”

Eberhardt shook his head as he recalled the terror.

“The veterans all said, ‘if you survived that, man, you’ve got to become a skydiver.’ I was spooked. It took me two weeks before I made another jump. Looking back, it was all human error. Don’t jump during thunderstorms. Everybody knows that.”

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“When we were younger, Joe would ask if I wanted to go out for dinner or skydive,” said Eberhardt’s wife, Laura. “That was kind of silly. Of course I wanted the skydive. And then I’d end up getting dinner out of it too.”

Despite the nervousness, many first-time tandem jumpers touch down with a sense of pride. Exiting the drop zone in a jumpsuit, emotions bubble with nervous energy, a tangible sense of accomplishment. Smiles wide, words tumble as they attempt to describe free fall.

“Now I know what a cloud tastes like,” mused first-time jumper Kerrick Woysner, 19, of Hamburg.

Eberhardt feeds off these emotions, hugging fellow jumpers, smiling, posing for photos. He understands there is no simple way to describe the first skydive.

“Start with the rush of a free fall,” Laura explained. “Then the parachute opens and it’s so beautiful. At that point, you hear everything. I was scared to death the first time I jumped, but I never expected skydiving to be so incredible. I tell people it’s the greatest combination of adrenaline and tranquility that you’ll ever find.”

New jumpers describe free fall as the fastest minute of their lives.

Eberhardt grins, pushing contoured sunglasses along the bridge of his nose. He knows that free fall is worth it all. He’s ready to board the plane again.

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