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She Jumps From Plane for Rape Crisis Centers

To help sexual assault survivors, Molly M. Ginty and others went skydiving last month with Operation Freefall. She got over her jitters and took the dive with a guide nicknamed Batman to raise money for crisis centers and express outrage at rape.

By Molly M. Ginty, WeNews Correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – It seemed like reason enough to leap head first out a plane.



Molly M. Ginty

Operation Freefall, an Orlando, Fla., nonprofit, said I could raise \$600 to fund rape crisis centers. All I had to do was win financial support from friends and family, then defy death by skydiving to take a “two-mile stand against sexual assault.”

Such was the thinking of Kellie Greene, the 41-year-old Florida activist who founded Operation Freefall in 2001. Raped by a stranger in 1994, Greene experienced a breakthrough in her emotional healing when she tried skydiving for the first time on the fifth anniversary of her attack.

“On the night I was raped, surges of adrenalin ripped through me,” says Greene. “Afterward, I wanted to experience something that would give me the same flight-or-fight rush, but that would rewire all the bad feelings left over from my attack. When I jumped, I accomplished this, and realized I could take risks, survive them, and perhaps convince others to skydive for charity and instill the same confidence in them.”

Greene’s story – and those of other rape survivors I’ve known – inspired me to join 156 other volunteers in Operation Freefall’s nationwide skydiving initiative, which took place at 18 drop zones in 16 states. After learning about the event online, I jumped at the chance to jump. This was a vitally important cause, and supporting it would be more fun – and much more adventurous – than caving in to the droning pledge drives on public radio.

‘Have You Made Your Will?’

In a flurry, I filled out an application and fired off e-mails calling for pledges. Money trickled back. Controversy did too. Some of my loved ones applauded my plan; others were nothing short of horrified. “Let this be a one-shot deal,” said my father. “Like the time you tried to ride that circus elephant. I hate to ask you this, but have you considered making a will?”

I laughed. But I did write my will. And beneath the bravado, I worried. On the eve of the event I lay awake, plagued by questions. I was jumping with a tandem instructor who would be harnessed to me, requiring that I have only minimal training and ensuring that someone else could pull the parachute rip cord if necessary. But what if my instructor fell asleep on the job? What if the parachute didn’t open and sent us plunging – splat! – to earth?

The next morning, as I made my way to my skydiving date, traffic crawled and sputtered along the highway. The radio played Van Halen’s “Jump!” followed by Tom Petty’s “Free Fallin’.” None of this helped calm my fears in the least as I drove northward, clutching the steering wheel so hard that my knuckles slowly drained white.

What did help was remembering the people to whom the jump was dedicated. I thought of one friend so traumatized by her 2 a.m. rape that she couldn’t sleep for years afterward unless all the lights were on. I thought of another who was unable to have sex without suffering violent flashbacks. I remembered anti-violence advocates I’ve interviewed as a journalist, including one whose sexual assault went unreported because she was deaf and police didn’t understand her sign language, and another who was shot in the back three times and left for dead by her rapist.

As I remembered these brave survivors, I found myself rolling up the gravel driveway of my “drop zone,” a commercial skydiving spot called Skydive the Ranch in sleepy Gardiner, N.Y. Overhead, black dots swirled in the clouds. As the dots descended, they sprouted legs, arms and parachutes. Someone yelled “Yeeeeee-HA!” and a skydiver swooped to the grass near my feet, followed by a billowing orange canopy.

An Unflappable Batman

One fuzzy instructional video and seven pages of release forms later, I was wearing an oversized jumpsuit and shaking hands with “Batman,” my tandem jump instructor. With his platinum-dyed hair and electric blue eyes – and with the sinews in his jaw pumping as he spoke – my partner seemed far too wired to fall asleep on the job. He’d been skydiving for 20 years, was utterly unflappable, and made me feel safe as he helped me clamber onto the small, buzzing plane that swept us skyward.



Operation Freefall raises money for rape crisis centers.

Credit: Operation Freefall.

Also aboard were other Operation Freefall volunteers: one woman who’d heard about the jump through a Web site for

rape survivors, and another who'd raised double the required pledge money and brought her boyfriend along to skydive with her. All four of us clutched our seats as our instructors adjusted our harnesses. Helmets? Check. Goggles? Check. Exhilaration as the plane door opened? Check.

With Batman strapped behind me, I lurched toward the door, fighting the surreal feeling that this was happening to someone else. Don't look down. Oh please God don't look down. Our cameraman leapt. Then I leapt. Through open sky then clouds then sunshine freefalling windwhipping heartpounding 120 milesperhour wheeeeeeeeeee!

At Batman's signal, I pulled the rip cord and – whoooosh! – the parachute unfurled. Everything slowed to a gentle adagio, and everything seemed just magnificent. The Catskill Mountains. The cars and cows and buildings below. No green had ever been as green as that of the fields stretched before us. No blue had ever been as blue as that of the sky stretched above. The parachute was easier to steer than that circus elephant. The high of floating was transcendent.

Prepare for Landing

After our 60-second freefall and our five-minute descent, Batman and I prepared for landing. I lifted my legs as his feet hit the ground. We pedaled to a stop, and as I squealed with delight, we exchanged hugs and disentangled ourselves from our parachute.

Watching the video of my jump afterward was enlightening, and embarrassing. Instead of falling as instructed (with back arched and knees bent), I plummeted toward the earth like a plywood plank, legs and arms extended, eyebrows stapled to my forehead. I managed to blow kisses and mouth the words to Kate Bush's "Big Sky," which my friend Liz dared me to sing in exchange for a generous pledge. But my grin was manic, and the joy in my eyes couldn't mask the terror reeling there.

On the positive side, I survived. And that's not the only good news. Congress recently passed the 2000 Sexual Predator Prosecution Act (mandating consecutive prison sentences for multiple sex offenders); the 2004 Debbie Smith Bill (improving the collection of evidence in hospital rape kits); and the 2005 Violence Against Women Act (devoting an unprecedented \$50 million to rape crisis initiatives).

Nonetheless, sobering facts remain; 60 percent of rapes go unreported and the average rapist attacks eight victims before being apprehended. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which ranks crimes in order of violence, places rape second on its list, trailing only murder in severity.

Though Operation Freefall has raised \$120,000 this year (and a total \$473,000 to date), that's nowhere near enough to address the suffering of the 1 in 6 U.S. women who endure rape or attempted rape during their lifetimes. The frequency and savagery of this crime are an outrage: reason enough to defy death by diving out of a plane.

Molly M. Ginty is a freelance writer in New York City.

For more information:

Operation Freefall: <http://www.operationfreefall.com/>

National Sexual Violence Resource Center: <http://www.nsvrc.org/>

“Boat Ride Reveals Undertow of Thai Sex Trade”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2740/>

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