

Charity Skydive in aid of
Beaumont House Community Hospice
Sat 27th March 2010

When Wil (fundraising manager at Beaumont House) announced to the directors that he intended to organise a skydive in order to encourage sponsorships and raise publicity, the adventurous and impulsive side of me mentally signed on immediately but the brain told me I had to be crazy.

Although I am passionate about the work that Beaumont House does in reaching out to those in the community with life-limiting conditions, supporting them and their families in every way, I had never really stepped out of my comfort zone in my active involvement. Being a director is a huge privilege and I am delighted to be able to give my time to work with the fantastic team but money is also needed every year to continue this work and especially now as we seek to expand the services we can offer.

The original date assigned for our group dive was the 20th. However the weather was poor and the group disappointedly was forced to rebook our dives for new dates, scattered about the calendar as availability permitted. Having turned up the previous week, been briefed and virtually survived a dive, this time felt completely different and my fears had evaporated. It was a lovely day, with high fluffy clouds and lots of blue sky. As I arrived bright and early to ensure that I made the first flight, I was confident that today was the day. Several hundreds of pounds of sponsorship was hanging on what happened in the next few hours. I was the first punter to arrive and I settled down with my book, hoping that the cafe would open up soon so I could have some breakfast (it was still only 8am).

It wasn't long before there was a queue of folk signing up to jump that day so I was glad to have arrived early and I had only just downed my egg and bacon roll before the first 5 were called for our briefing. The serious parts were interspersed with several jokes to put us at our ease, although the 17year old student, diving as part of her studies into adrenalin (!!!!!) but I couldn't help thinking that the position we needed to adopt on exiting the plane looked disturbingly like a person laid out for burial, with arms crossed on our chests and heads back! I quickly tried to dismiss that thought and was introduced to my instructor, 'Milko', who was responsible for my wellbeing for the jump and to whom I would be strapped (he also had the parachute so I was keen to be very well attached). Although he was extremely professional, I was reassured to know that there was an automatic height-sensitive mechanism for deploying the chute should he fail to do so for any reason (such as me hanging on to his arms in terror!) and that there was also a reserve chute should the first not work. We had to sign all the usual disclaimers, not designed to reassure, however, and then proceeded to the plane. I knew it was 50 years old, having seen a poster about its birthday party in the changing rooms. Hopefully it was good for another good few years yet.

I would imagine it was a bit like being a celebrity, as the onlookers cheered and waves, cameras clicked and my personal cameraman, Tony, trotted alongside, to ensure he captured every second, and hopefully my best side. There were only 2 of us who were actually doing tandem jumps on the first flight. The others were all doing solo jumps and all had cameras on their helmets - the in-flight paparazzi! As we spiralled up through the clouds the views were fantastic and the jokes flowed freely, I discovered that recently some of the instructors had taken part in a world record breaking skydive in Thailand as part of a huge 400-person formation falling from 26,000 feet. There were lots of stickers with slogans such as 'This is a gravity-fuelled sport' dotted over the walls and it was extremely cosy with 2 rows of us sitting in between each others legs, the paparazzi regularly checking their altimeters. We had reached a mere 14,000feet when the plane

levelled off and suddenly I was the only person left to jump (with Milko of course). We shuffled forwards to the gaping hole in the plane as I tried to avoid thoughts of plummeting and rapidly approaching ground and words like splat and crunch. I couldn't get too wound up though because I had my exit shot to think about. Dave was hanging off the outside of the plane waiting to shoot me as I went. It wouldn't do to look too terrified. Yes, it was definitely worth doing - think of all those people generously giving for the cause.

Suddenly we were free - in the air, falling. The initial sensation was like that you get on a roller coaster and made me gasp. Then, once that had left me I could relax a little more and enjoy the sensation, Tony was in front of us with his camera so I needed to grin widely and wave rather than look around. I was quite interested in trying a move like banking to one side, having already asked how it was done. This hadn't been scripted, however, so I restrained myself and settled on a thumbs up. Suddenly we stopped!. At least that's what it felt like. We had decelerated from well over 100mph (500 feet per second) to 10mph. The drogue (tiny parachute which acted like a little brake) had ensured that the initial fall wasn't so fast that the deceleration was too abrupt and uncomfortable. Dave was far below us and I knew that the parachute had opened. The roar of wind had disappeared and all was peaceful. There was the opportunity to look around, at 6,000 feet there were still good views, punctuated by cloud. Milko managed to position us so that the sun created a shadow of us on a neighbouring wall of cloud in the centre of a perfect circular rainbow. Awesome!

The freedom, peace and beauty of the experience can hardly be described but I was struck by how amazing our environment really is and how we should do all we can to preserve it as best we can - but also to get out in it and appreciate what we have, whilst we can.

The landing area was now in sight so I needed to focus back on the practicalities of getting back in touch with the ground - a serious issue as I definitely didn't want to undo any of the good surgical repair work done on my knee, courtesy of our wonderful NHS. I did as I was told and we had a faultless landing (thankfully to feet, not bottoms, much more dignified), and were greeted by cheering and applause from the crowd. Feeling exhilarated and victorious, I was again greeted by Tony with camera and managed to display my special Beaumont House supporters t-shirt.

Very relieved, and not too wobbly-legged, I walked back to the 'arrival/departures lounge' to get out of the overalls and very fetching Biggles hat and goggles. I was presented with my certificate (my friends had told me I was certifiable!). So, for those who doubted whether I would actually go through with the jump I had proof, and the DVD of my exploits would confirm that I had not printed it off myself!

At church the next morning, many congratulations came (though as many if them had trained for marathons and many other much more impressive achievements, I thought they were most gracious). Money flowed in and, together with the generosity of patients of our surgery and friends from all over the country donating online, I think I have raised above £900 for Beaumont House. I now would like to break the £1000 mark (double my original target) so all you who have not yet got around to it, get online to 'Just Giving' and you will easily find my page for the next 3 weeks.

A huge thank you to all my sponsors and to all the staff at Beaumont house for the amazing work you do.

Dr Julie Barker