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His bucket list includes jumping from a plane

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By JANE MICHAELS

"Way cool!" were LaGrange Park Don Chapim's first words, when he was safely on the ground after diving headfirst out of a plane at 15,000 feet -- a very way-cool feat for a guy in his early 80s.

The Plymouth Place resident doesn't consider himself a daredevil, just a guy following a skydiving dream he's had for a decade. Circumstances didn't work out for his 80th birthday three years ago, but the timing was right for the plunge of a lifetime on Sept. 16, and he jumped on it.

So did Dale Lilburn, the chief executive officer of Plymouth Place, who said he's always had a thing for airborne opportunities.

"I like everything to do with planes. I'm a wannabe pilot, but I don't have the money or the time," he explained about his decision to free fall for 10,000 feet. Bolstered, perhaps, by Chapim's bravado and quest for the ultimate flying experience, Lilburn also signed up to jump in tandem with an experienced diver from the Chicagoland Skydiving Center in Hinckley, Ill.

Lilburn was every bit as enamored with the experience as Chapim. Previously, Lilburn had flown in an ultra light hang glider, which is similar to being strapped to a kite with an engine.

Chapim, too, had several previous notable flight experiences to prepare for the dive. He rode in a biplane as a birthday present one year, flew in a small plane with an open cockpit and inspected an oil rig from a helicopter several times. He also served in France and Germany during World War II, though that didn't include any parachuting or flying.

Chapim said his wife, Ruth, was supportive but couldn't stand the idea of watching him; he called her as soon as he landed, he said. His daughter and her husband accompanied the daring duo and took pictures from the ground.

"I liked the free fall, but the whole experience was kind of hypnotic," Chapim observed. "It's a good thing Rob (the tandem diver) was paying attention to pull the cord. I liked being able to steer the parachute with a couple of loops on the left and right."

Once divers plunge headfirst out of the plane at 15,000 feet, a small parachute is deployed to slow the descent slightly and extend the free fall experience. At 5,000 feet, one of the divers must pull the cord for the major parachute. Chapim said he was concerned about his knees, but the landing's impact was surprisingly gentle.

Both sky-jumping enthusiasts said they would try the experience again.

"That was one of the wildest things. I didn't think that would happen in my wildest dreams," Chapim said. "But it all came together. I'm still on a high."



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