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# Skydiver on a Collision Course With Heroism in the Arizona Sky

## 'She Would Have Died and I Just Could Not Let That Happen'

By PAUL DEAN, These Staff Writer  
In a life where death is the hunter, my friend, there is no time for fear or regrets, only decisions.

—A skydiving buddy taken from "Don Juan"

PHOENIX—Even master skydivers—those indifferent to the daring and fatalities of their sport—have passed to admire one colleague's decision to defy the hunter.

The reason a vertical, head-down dive in pursuit of an unconscious novice who had collided with another freefalling skydiver—has opened the woman's parachute less than 10 seconds before she would have hit the ground.

Gentry Cooksaw  
The rescuer Gregory Robertson, a grumpy, cocksure, 30-year-old electrical engineer for AT&T whose mid-air save on April 18 has already earned him company's Theodore E. Vail Award (worth \$10,000) for exemplary public service. Now the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission is reviewing the accident.

The rescued, Debbie Williams, 31, a fifth-grade teacher from Post, Tex., now at Humana Hospital, Alabama, Tex. She was flown there Monday from Scottsdale Memorial Hospital near here. She remains in fair condition. But Williams has her life.

Robertson's life on the other hand is barely his own. There's an agent-entrepreneur in Reno orchestrating his interviews and protecting his rights in case a movie is offered. There has been a photo reconstruction for the tabloids and two pages of coverage by the London Daily Mirror. Next month's issue of Parachutist, the magazine of the U.S. Parachute



Gregory Robertson: "It was time to get her down, now."

As "Baster Mizerle" So a friend is calling the rescue an Easter miracle. In European newspapers, a headline imperative for Robertson is become repetition. Superstern, Jumpers are telephoning daily asking him to detail the full, firsthand chronology of the rescue. In case, they say, the opportunity might one day be theirs.

Last week, as Robertson handled his canopy after his third jump of the morning, an airline captain called to call. Captain Robert Lufthansa pilot under a teaching contract with a PMA subsidiary. He had an envelope for Robertson.

It just passed the hat around the gate, just a blank space so Robertson would have one. Robertson explained, "Most of us [instructors] were you get the M&M's for."

He was on the spot and said, "I do this thing." And he did it. That's going down in the first day. And there's some poetry here about not counting the cost.

parachute center at Coolidge Municipal Airport southeast of here. It had been a day of more interviews, more tributes, more photographs. "Yeah... the point would have come, where, exactly, I don't know, but there would have been a point where I would have just freed my own rescue to save myself."

That I had the time, I had a few seconds to spare there and it worked. When I started, no, I did not know if it would work. But I had to try. She was going to die. She would have died and I just could not let that happen. I could not live with myself for just letting someone die and not trying.

But he did try. He did not let Williams die.

At 10:30 a.m., at 15,000 feet above Coolidge Airport, the jumpers were briefed and ready. Williams, Gary Fitzwater of Van Nuys, Alan Rodriguez of Milpitas, Tex., Alex, Dallas, Gary Bellamy and Ken Neville, all from the San Diego area. Each had paid \$15 for the jump.

The group's plan was to exit the airplane, link hands and form a freefalling circle. They would descend, make individual, 90-degree turns, then reform the circle prior to breakaway and chute deployment at 3,000 feet.

Robertson watched them exit. So I left... yep, yep, yep... out the door I went, about a second or two behind them. I looked at them. Three of them, Oksa, Bellamy and Neville) were linked together, who was Gary (Fitzwater), had been linked, had fallen off and was slightly below me.

I noticed Debbie, and her body form for what she wants to do is excellent. It was a standard dive up until this point. Nothing weird yet.

Fitzwater, by arching in the air as if sprouting over a barrel, had slowed his descent, rising above the formation. It brought him close to Williams. Then Rodriguez



Hero under the canopy is Gregory Robertson who says training, experience dictated diving rescue.

Williams did not have the experience to dive 400 feet and make a confident docking with the group.

To get that much vertical distance from a standing start, with the time left and everything, I said "Well, she ain't going to make it. So I decided to go and get a two-way with her because this actually was what I considered a dangerous situation."

You've got two groups of people, relatively inexperienced, at two very different skydiving levels, separated by about 500 feet and almost directly over each other. When you get skydivers vertical like that, and they're novices, what I considered a dangerous situation.

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locked with the three-person formation. And he was too fast, too fast.

He held on to the people and turned the whole formation vertical. Robertson continued, "instead of being complete, nice and round and stable, it [the formation] is vertical."

It's called funneling. There's less wind resistance, hence they accelerate downward. If the formation just makes out of the sky, the sudden descent from 10,000 feet to 3,000 feet. Williams and Fitzwater are 400 feet above the formation. Robertson was 10 feet higher than the couple and 50 feet to one side. He was certain of one thing, Williams



Debbie Williams, with fiance Bill Roche, remains hurt but on the mend after midair rescue saved her life at skydiving meet.

Before things went wrong, everything went impressively, fatefully right.

There had been genuine problems with the antique DC-4 transport that was to carry the skydivers aloft for a series of formation jumps. But the competitor for the bid, the pilot gave the jumpers another 1,000 feet altitude.

Any of a dozen egress among the 400 divers at this Easter meet could have flown to land operator. But Gregory Robertson, a man whose idea of the perfect birthday party was to make 30 jumps in seven hours, the U.S. Parachute Assn.'s safety and training administrator for the day, decided to take the flight.

Debbie Williams might have been just another skydiver of unknown skills and no particular regard for reputation. But earlier, Robertson had seen Williams having trouble repacking her chute, stepped to assist, discovered she was a novice with only 90 jumps and had made a mental note to keep an eye on her.

And as he looked Williams and her air-jumper group in the front of the DC-4. That way they would exit close to last and behind experts doing 15- and 30-way formations.

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## Mothering on the Telephone . . . It's the Busiest Signal of Them All



By LINDA MATTHEWS, These Staff Writer  
"It's one of your kids again," my co-worker said, handing me the telephone. "Joe is bothering me." Peter, three & a half years at the other end of the line. "Tell him to leave me alone." "OK," I said worriedly. "Put him on and I'll see if I can straighten that out."

"I can't," Peter explained. "I locked him out of the house."

Dive so faintly over the line, I could hear Joe, then 12, banging on the back door and screaming that he would not stop until he had settled the score with his brother.

Once again, I found myself practicing the art that Doctors Spock and Brazelton never told you about: mothering by phone. Since I first started calling Joe from the office when he was just a toddler, I have had almost daily practice. I have diagnosed fevers, soothed scraped knees, untied squabbles and, more recently, explained what little I could remember about polynomial equations—all over the phone.

All the personnel manuals, of course, say that the ideal employee should avoid letting personal and family matters interfere with business. Life should be neatly compartmentalized, so that what is going on at home never impinges

on company routine. A worker should keep his mind on his work. There may be some pangloss out there who actually live by these rules—but they're not mothers.

Working mothers usually always know what is going on at home, no matter how busy they are. Whether they spend their days word processing or working on assembly lines or drafting multimillion-dollar legal contracts, mothers are linked, as fathers rarely are, to what their children are doing at home or at the baby sitter's.

And the link, more often than not, is the telephone.

Eye to Eye  
Mothering by phone usually starts with those nervous calls to the baby sitter right after the new mother returns to work, to check on whether the baby is napping and eating on schedule.

By the child's first birthday, the phone will be held up to his ear so that Mommy can speak directly to him and perhaps, O bliss, elicit some response. By 18 months, usually on his day at nursery school. By 2, the child of parents precociously is direct-dialing Mom.

So accustomed is Evesa Solomon, 1, to talking to her mother, Susan, on the phone that when someone asks, "Where's Mommy?" Evesa holds her hand up to her ear as if she were cranking a receiver. Her

brother, 6, is more practiced and a bit more formal, when he dials Susan's office, he announces, "This is Linda, your mom."

School-aged children often get into the habit of calling as soon as they reach home, whether there's a baby sitter there or not. "My daughter calls just about every day because she wants to check in, to be reassured that I'm here," one Los Angeles mother said of a 7-year-old. "She asks me whether she should change to cooler clothes, what she should have for a snack."

"I'll be out of the office in the afternoon. I'll come back and find a stack of messages." Mommy call "Tart." Mommy, I called 15 minutes ago. "Then, Mommy, I got a message that said, 'Call Tara in 15 minutes.' It turned out she figured she would be away from the phone using something else that long."

Sorry kids quickly figure out that if they've broken a household rule or misbehaved, it's better to report the transgression on the phone rather than wait for Mother to come home. "My kids know that if they tell me they've broken my favorite vase when I'm in the office, I'll yell at them without calling attention to myself," a Westlake lawyer said. "And by the time I get home, I've cooled off."

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PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY C. LEWIS FOR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

