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■ **CHARITY:** Second annual Jumping for PALS raises big bucks for Sunnybrook clinic

J.T. MCVEIGH PHOTOS The Barrie Examiner

Derek Walton swoops into the SkyDive Toronto landing field in Innisfil, directed by tandem master Igor Kosanov, during his annual Jumping for PALS (People with ALS) fundraiser, Saturday. More than 30 jumpers took to the skies to raise money for research to fight the disease. To date, Walton has raised more than $150,000 for Sunnybrook hospital in Toronto, which has an ALS clinic.

Taking the plunge to help cure ALS

More than 30 people turn Derek Walton's sky-high dream into a reality

J.T. MCVEIGH
Barrie Examiner

Gusty winds and cloudy skies didn't take the shine off the largest collection of goofy grins gathered since the last Santa Claus parade.

What started off as one fellow's wish to bring attention to a little understood disease is blooming into a catalyst for memories and fulfilling personal 'bucket lists'.

Derek Walton's Jumping for PALS (People with ALS) has gone beyond the novelty of one man doing something with a failing body, to an international gathering, all working for one cause.

Walton, who has lived with ALS, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, (also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease) for the past eight years, started this event to bring awareness to this fatal disease.

ALS is a mysterious killer, with no known cause, but overwhelms the patient quickly. On average, life span after diagnosis is normally two to three years.

Falling within the scope of neurological disorders, such as MS, ALS is the only disease where it is the disease itself that takes the patient.

What makes Walton unique is that he's entering the ninth year of living with the disease, and he is prepared to toss himself out of a plane to bring attention to the needs of patients and their families struggling against its devastating effects.

Last year was the first year of the event. The moment he touched down at SkyDive Toronto back then, he was already planning for this year's big event.

Initially, he wanted about 18 people to join him, once word got out the number climbed to more than 30, all with their own reason for wanting to be there.

And they came from across North America, three from the U.S., including Mike Linarez,

Jeff O'Hagan, left, CEO of the Sunnybrook Foundation at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, talks to Derek Walton and his wife, Diane Rowat-Walton, about Walton's jump at the Jumping for PALS event. Walton's foundation has raised more than $150,000 for Sunnybrook.

who drove from Reno, Nev., to jump in memory of his father, who succumbed to the disease.

"I lost my dad in 2003 to ALS," Linarez said, waiting near the hangar before he jumped.

"I met some wonderful people and learned that the jump was going on from a friend on Facebook and decided to make a long vacation out of it. It means a lot to me to be here, and they've made a good event out of it."

From the U.S., Linarez was joined with two others, one who came from Louisiana and the third from California.

"Derek has been a real leader in the ALS community," said Jeff O'Hagan, CEO of the Sunnybrook Hospital Foundation. "Sunnybrook is the largest ALS clinic in North America, and ALS is a challenging road. We are just so thankful and inspired that he has done so much for us to help with research and to help the families as they go through their very difficult battle."

Walton's efforts have raised more than $150,000 for Sunnybrook.

Community leaders joined with Walton in the only formal element of the day — a flag raising. Municipal officials from Innisfil and Barrie MP Patrick Brown showed their support for the event now, and into the future.

Brown has been a champion in Ottawa focusing on the gov-

Mike Linarez heard about the Jumping for PALS event from a Canadian Facebook friend and drove from Reno, Nev., to take part in his first jump to honour his father, who died from ALS.

ernment's responsibility to people living with neurological diseases, and has twice brought Walton to Ottawa to speak at sub-committees on the issue.

After he landed, Walton was exuberant about the 10,000-ft jump. "I think this jump was better than the first," he said. "It was a lot more clear up there, and I think everyone is pretty excited about their experience."

The air around the hangar at SkyDive Toronto was electric and, judging from the smiles and excitement all round, that probably was an understatement.

Linarez was looking forward to getting a video of his jump.

"You know it's like the big fish. You can say that you caught it, but everybody wants to see

the photos."

Many of the jumpers are ready to take Walton up on his offer to jump again next year, but for some, once was enough.

David Zilstra, *Barrie Examiner* publisher, who is not known for appreciating heights, has been a supporter of the event since arriving in Barrie.

Zilstra fundraised like the others and greatly enjoyed the experience, but thinks he may pass on another opportunity.
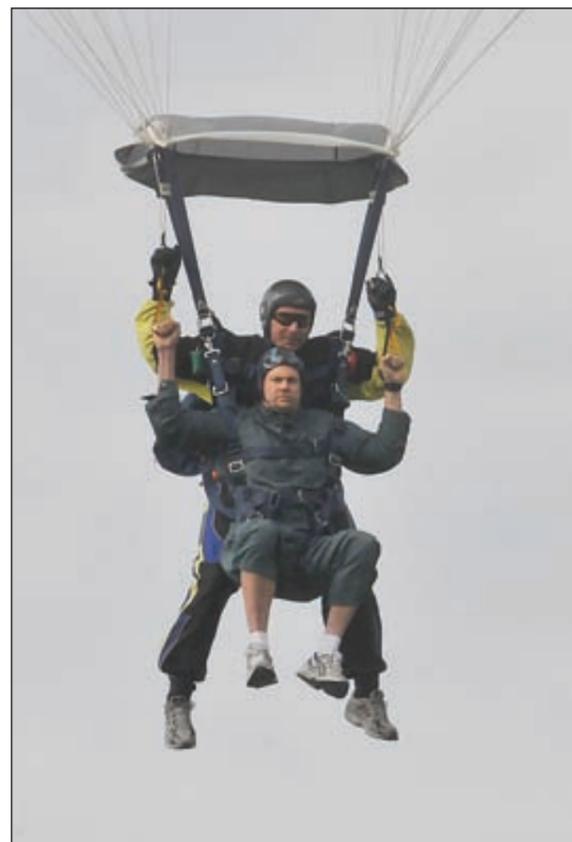
Safely back on the ground after his four-minute adventure, Zilstra didn't have to think long about whether he'd jump again.

"No I don't think so. My bucket (list) is full," he laughed.

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Cheryl Browne, of Rock 95, celebrates her first jump at the landing field at SkyDive Toronto as one of the more than 30 jumpers — many of them first timers — helping Derek Walton raise money for the Sunnybrook Hospital Foundation.

ABOVE: Barrie Examiner publisher David Zilstra comes in for a landing while taking part in Saturday's fundraiser. The Examiner was one of the media sponsors of the event, which raised money for the Sunnybrook Hospital Foundation's ALS clinic.
BELOW: Derek Walton, who founded the event, is flanked by Zilstra, left, and Examiner editor Brian Rodnick.