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Executives find common hobby in skydiving

## Local Businesspeople Skydive to Decompress

Divers Hone Skills, Make Pals Like POTUS

By MEDIHA DIMARTINO

Most executives associate the term parachute with a golden one they can count on if they part ways with the company they're running. For several Orange County leaders who are also skydiving aficionados, it means a ticket out of the daily grind for a refresh before returning to the office.

"This is the ultimate form of meditation and stress relief, because you have to be focused 100% on what is happening in the moment, or things can go very bad," said **J.R. Galardi**, president of Irvine-based **Galardi Group Inc.**, which operates the Wienerschnitzel, Tastee-Freez and Hamburger Stand franchises.

"Everything in life disappears except for what's happening (in the air)."

Galardi, son of late company founder **John Galardi**, and **Cindy Galardi Culpepper**, who serves as chief executive, took up the sport in college, getting back to it in 2016. He's completed more than 180 jumps since, most with **Chris Wilkerson**, vice president of finance at **Ethika Inc.**, an underwear brand employing 96 people at its Lake Forest headquarters.

Wilkerson still remembers his first jump and the moments infused with both fear and exhilaration.

"I was always intrigued by skydiving, but I'd never just pulled the trigger do it. Then a couple of days before my 30th birthday, [Galardi] said, 'Hey, you want to go skydiv-

ing? And I was like sure, yeah, let's do it. It sounds fun. I'm turning 30, why not to do it?"

"And then, I was on the plane with him, and I remember thinking, 'What am I doing? I'm not jumping. I've never been on a plane with a door open ... Then he gets out and does a bunch of flips, and it was just so peaceful how he did it, and it looked so cool. So I ended up jumping, and it was surreal, because you feel like you're flying. And at the same time I was terrified. I thought I was going to die, for sure."

Wilkerson relaxed once the parachute opened, absorbing his surroundings for a couple of minutes—until he remembered he also had to land.

"They give you walkie-talkies to coach you through it—they tell you, 'Turn left, turn right'—and my walky-talky wasn't working," he said.

The jump ended with a downwind landing, "which is very hard," but didn't discourage him from trying again. He's now completed about

150 jumps.

### Jump Full Time?

The diving buddies' favorite spots include Oceanside and Perris drop zones, which they frequent at least once a week.

"Some people have quit their jobs, sell everything they own, live in a van in the parking lot and skydive all day—and that's not just one or two people. That's a very good portion of the skydive community," Galardi said. "That's never going to be me... They live in a van and don't really have much money and eat ramen every night, but they have zero stress, no responsibilities.



Yikes: Ethika Inc. executive Chris Wilkerson enjoys diving with buddy weekly

And being in a position like us, where every day is full of responsibility and stress, sometimes I'll look at them, and think, 'Hmmm, you might have it right,' but then I go back to my beautiful home and my dog, and I'm like "Nahhh."

Returning to work on Monday after a day of skydiving is also enough for Wilkerson.

"It feels like you had a great weekend. You did something you really enjoy," he said. On his first 50 jumps, he "always felt super-accomplished," he said, because he was "continuing to face barriers and getting over that fear."

Comfort also comes through training and leaving nothing to chance. Wilkerson said he once aborted a jump because he found out that "a piece of my equipment wasn't working right. I could have realistically jumped, and it probably would've been 100% safe, but there's that 0.0001% chance of something happening ... You take all these extra precautions because it makes it more fun, and you're just super in the moment and not nervous about it going down."

Both men also prefer to fold their own parachutes, though "there are people you can pay

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BEYOND WORK



Diving buddies: Galardi Group President J.R. Galardi with friend and fellow business exec Chris Wilkerson



Big moment: Santa Ana businesswoman Lisa Walker, fourth from left, and her skydiving team posing with former President George H.W. Bush after they jumped with him on his 75th birthday

# Skydive

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to do it.”

“If there’s a mistake, at least you know it’s on you,” Wilkerson said.

## Thrills and Cachet

Other OC skydiving fans include **Stephen Blythe**, chief executive of Laguna Hills-based **Blytheco**, who “took up flying lessons when his wife, **Kathi**, asked him “to consider a less dangerous hobby,” and **Dennis Dougherty**, who hasn’t had a chance to pick up a parachute since taking on his duties as **Karma Automotive**’s president and chief operating officer two years ago.

**Joe Contreras**, vice president of product

and solutions marketing at Irvine-based **Toshiba America Business Solutions Inc.**, went skydiving with 10 friends while in college and said it was “awesome and very exhilarating.” Another executive, who works for an Irvine-based company with more than \$400 million in annual revenue and is planning to go skydiving for the July 4th holiday, politely declined to be interviewed for this story, worried that his business peers may consider his hobby “reckless.”

**Lisa Walker**, an executive business coach and co-founder of **Performance Strategies Inc.** in Santa Ana, said skydiving makes her “memorable” in business circles and has led to meeting like-minded clients.

“The other thing it does is it gives me a lot of confidence. There’s not that many people in the world that can jump out of a perfectly

good airplane.”

Walker has skydived for 28 years, and trains with 16- and eight-person formation teams here and in Houston. She was captain of a team of 181 women who in 2009 raised nearly \$1 million for the **City of Hope** and notched a women’s world record for a formation skydive. She said she also got to skydive with former President **George H.W. Bush** in 1999 for his well-publicized 75th birthday jump, an opportunity that proved to be one of her “most memorable skydiving experiences.”

She remembered, “We jumped onto the lawn, right in front of the Bush Library at Texas A&M.” Her skydiving team was also invited to a reception with the Bush family and the birthday bash.

She said the skills she’s developed through skydiving and training with formation teams

are the same ones she helps clients apply to their businesses.

“It’s about setting goals, having a strategy and a plan of attack to achieve them, and then working the process, having milestones and measurements. In any competitive sport, there’s measurements, there’s a million stats, right? But the people who run, especially small to midsize businesses, do a really poor job of measuring what’s going on in their business.”

Galardi has jumped along skydivers of all ages—from teenagers to several octogenarians. The sport is for “everyone unless you’re reckless, because that’s how accidents happen,” he said. “I would honestly recommend everybody to try skydiving once. You’ll become a better person, or you’ll just know it’s not for you to ever do it again.” ■