

Making the jump



A man with progressive MS fulfills a lifelong dream.

by Nitza Agam

My husband, Ofer, was 18 when he enlisted in the Israeli army as a paratrooper. He was scheduled to perform his first jump a few weeks after his basic training. But the Yom Kippur War of 1973 broke out, and he was wounded—shot in the chest. Luckily, he survived because the bullet passed through his chest and exited, but he never made that jump, and he always regretted it.

As if that weren't enough, Ofer was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis five years later at the age of 23.



Ofer Agam (in purple

shirt), who has MS, with instructor Clay Bonavito, after their tandem jump in April 2012. Doing the jump had been Agam's dream for more than 25 years. Photo courtesy of Nitza Agam

Fast forward more than 25 years: Ofer's MS is now significantly progressed and, for the most part, he relies on a wheelchair or scooter for mobility. MS has changed him a lot, but it hasn't changed his passions. That jump out of a plane had come to mean even more to him than it did at the age of 18; being able to complete it would free him from his almost-constant sitting position.

So, off we went to the Bay Area Skydiving Center in Byron, California. Ofer would fly tandem with an instructor, free fall for a minute, and then the parachute would open for six or seven minutes.

The instructors could not have been more supportive, excited and eager to help make Ofer's skydiving experience the best ever. They helped him dress in his flight uniform, made sure all his gear was in place and helped him embark on the small plane. I felt so proud of Ofer as he departed, knowing he was fulfilling his long-held dream. Sure enough, a few minutes later, I looked up into the sky; that speck of a purple parachute was Ofer! He landed safely on a soft spot of grass and was ecstatic. I had not seen him smile like that in a long time. He had finally made his jump.

Friends have wondered about the courage it took for him to jump off the plane 15,000 feet up in the air. But they don't know that it is not courage to jump out of a plane that makes him special; it is the everyday tasks he faces of getting dressed, or trying to stand up, or navigating from place to place, all while thinking ahead to how much time such an objective will take to accomplish. Achieving those tasks is what takes true courage and perseverance; jumping out of a plane is the easy part, the fun part.

I am proud of my husband for making the jump that he always wanted to do. I am even more proud of him, however, for living every day while maintaining his positive spirit and not allowing the limitations and challenges of MS to define him or us. We can't wait to schedule another jump. Who knows? Perhaps this time, I will jump too.

Nitza Agam is a writer and poet who lives in San Francisco with her husband, Ofer, who was diagnosed with MS in 1978.

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