

Up where he belongs



Fred Schwartz isn't Superman. Or is he?

by **Mike Knight**

No way Fred Schwartz should be skydiving. No way.

He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1994, and since then, the disease has not been his friend. Neither of his legs work, and his left arm doesn't clock in anymore either.

Given his level of disability, for safety's sake, Schwartz must find specially trained instructors who can tandem jump with him. Then, he has to be strapped into a jumpsuit, which gets attached to the instructor, and loaded into an airplane, which slowly climbs up to 13,500 feet before leveling off.

How high is 13,500 feet, exactly? For context, it's just shy of 2 ½ miles into the wild blue yonder. Or nearly halfway up Mount Everest. And a little less than five times taller than Dubai's Burj Khalifa, which, at 160 stories high, is the tallest building in the world. To do the math, that's 800 stories high.

And then? Schwartz and his instructor, wearing little more than goggles, a helmet, sneakers and jumpsuits, push out and away from the safe embrace of their plane into an unabated free-fall, the earth now hurtling up at them at roughly 120 miles an hour.

But it's no big deal to Schwartz. A former corporate accountant and finance guy in the healthcare industry, Schwartz isn't prone to hyperbole. Press him for the best part of skydiving and he'll have a hard time coming up with an answer, at least right away. And

then, after an almost awkward pause, he'll squeeze out the smallest amount of appreciation of his highflying feat: "It's always nice when the chute deploys properly," he says. "I won't diminish that."

Grateful Fred

Born in Anaheim, California, in 1969, Schwartz was less than a year old when his family moved to Moorestown, New Jersey, just east of Philadelphia. He played golf in high school and collegiately, attending Susquehanna University, majoring in business with an emphasis on finance. Shortly after graduating, Schwartz moved out of his parents' home, leasing a nearby apartment with his brother.

And shortly after that?

Schwartz experienced hearing loss. "One day, I woke up and couldn't hear out of my right ear," he says. "I was young and healthy and didn't even have a doctor, so I found one in the Yellow Pages." The doctor prescribed antibiotics in case it was an infection, then sent Schwartz to an ear, nose and throat specialist (ENT) when the antibiotics didn't help. After testing Schwartz in a sound booth, the ENT sent him to a neurologist, who "did a bunch of tests, including MRI, spinal tap, and video- and audio-evoked response tests. His conclusion was that I had 'a mild case of MS,' " Schwartz recalls. He was only 24 years old.



Schwartz has been involved with the Society in a variety of ways, including as a

volunteer and providing peer support. Photo by Skydive Cross Keys

Schwartz began living a little too recklessly. He was drinking more than he would have liked, while also smoking cigarettes. He decided he wanted to clean up his act, if for no other reason than managing life with MS better. “MS forced me to kind of tame that,” he says, “thinking that I don’t need to have self-inflicted healthcare problems on top of that.”

In addition to helping himself via a new focus on a healthier lifestyle, Schwartz began volunteering so he could help others, too. “For years, I volunteered for an organization called the Myelin Repair Foundation,” he says. Based in Northern California, the Myelin Repair Foundation’s mission is focused on identifying the biological markers (biomarkers) researchers need to better understand a disease’s current state and likely progression, including MS and other neurological conditions.

After meeting the president of the Greater Delaware Valley area at an educational program in the early 2000s, Schwartz also began volunteering for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, which led him to Karen Mariner, then a recently hired MS Navigator. MS Navigators are Society staff members who help connect people affected by MS to the resources, information and support they need to move forward with their lives.

Mariner met with Schwartz, telling him after they’d talked for a bit that he would make a great “I & R” (Information and Referral) volunteer, working in the chapter center and fielding calls from people with MS, an arrangement Mariner thought might benefit Schwartz as well.

“Fred was struggling with his diagnosis,” recalls Mariner, who is now executive vice president of MS Navigator Experience. “I don’t think at the time he knew the resilience that he actually had, and I think he was trying to figure out how he could contribute. I saw someone who could really be a great source of support to other individuals living with MS.”

Mariner says it was just what Schwartz needed.

“Fred came on board, got trained and then just kind of blossomed,” she says.

In addition to his volunteer work, Schwartz also organized and ran self-help groups. “I started to see this individual who really started to ‘live’ with MS,” Mariner says.

He flies through the air. With a little unease.

Schwartz also began looking for fundraising opportunities, quickly ruling out many of the traditional approaches he was familiar with.

“I can’t ride a bike, so I can’t do Bike MS,” he thought. “And I can’t walk. I could use my power wheelchair, but skydiving seemed like something I could do, something exciting that would draw attention.”

Finding a skydiving company with a properly trained instructor, Schwartz says, wasn't that hard.

"The first place I found had people who worked with disabled skydivers," he says.

Schwartz is pulled right up to the airplane, securely strapped to his instructor and loaded into the plane. The entire jump lasts for maybe 90 seconds, the first 10 to 15 of which are spent in free-fall. "It's thrilling when you're free-falling," Schwartz says. "After the chute deploys, it's kind of just relaxing. There's no stress anymore. It's sort of peaceful and an amazing view." Just before landing, his instructor uses a strap to pull Schwartz's knees up and towards his chest, which makes it possible for the two to land safely.

Unfortunately for Schwartz, the instructor he jumped with is no longer with the company, so he'll have to find a new resource. Mariner has no doubt that Schwartz will jump again. That's just who he is.

"When you say the name 'Fred Schwartz' to me, I think about what is possible. Fred approaches problems in a very thoughtful, methodical way," Mariner says. "I have found him to always be about the possibility of the solution versus the limitations."

Schwartz has become what Mariner calls the "Society manifest."

"Fred really is one of these individuals who embodies all of the work of the Society," she says. "He's been a volunteer, he's been a fundraiser, he has done peer support, he's been involved in self-help groups. He's somebody who also demonstrates that there are a lot of ways one individual can have meaningful impact and engagement as a volunteer."

Mike Knight is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in 2013.

Learn about [volunteer opportunities](#) with the National MS Society.