

WHY MARIAN SPARKS JUMPS FOR THE

ROSE

(And Why You Should Too,
No Matter Where You Call Home)



SKYDIVING MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A *Parachutist* series on nonprofit organizations that give back to their communities



By Annette O'Neil

When you ask Marian Sparks why she has dedicated the last eight years of her life (and counting) to a skydiving charity, her answer is simple: "I wanted to give back to the people who saved my life." Indeed, she has ... and then some.

Sparks, a whip-smart blonde who looks much younger than her 63 years, has been jumping since 2006. She's a nail tech by trade. Before that, she worked for the post office. "I became a nail tech because I really love doing what I do," she said, smiling. "I've got wonderful clients. Some of them have been coming to me for all 24 of the years I've been doing this. A lot of them have been very big contributors to Jump for the Rose."

As much fulfillment as she gets from her work, the one thing it does not provide is robust health insurance. Sparks knew that she was at risk for breast cancer because her mother suffered from it, so she made sure to get a mammogram every year from her 35th birthday onward. For quite some time, that wasn't a problem; she enjoyed excellent insurance through her husband, a medically retired veteran.

The Hammers Fall

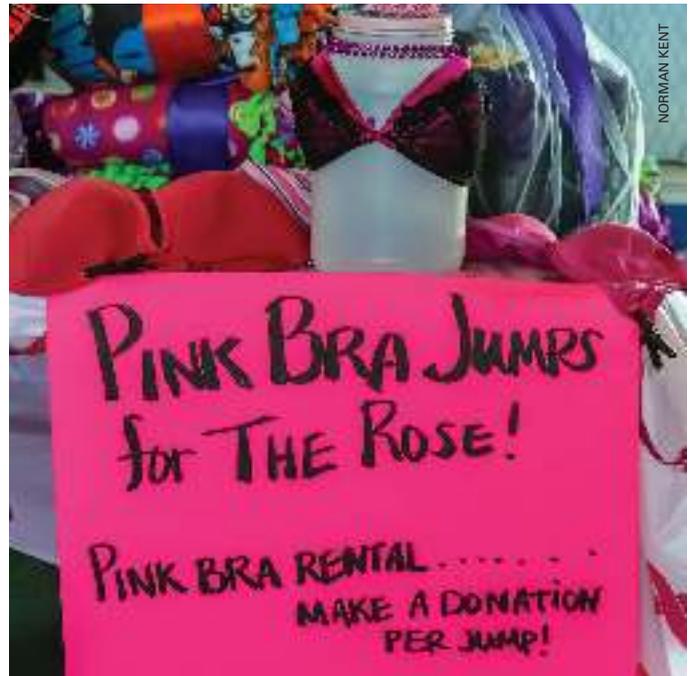
Then, in 2008, several unexpected hammers fell. Sparks' husband left her. Then Hurricane Ike thrashed her home on the Texas coast, and she was forced to gather what she could and find another place to live. Self-employed and without insurance, the financial burden was crushing. The colossal stress was actively making her sick, but—for the first time—Sparks believed that her yearly mammogram was beyond her means.

"Here I was, trying to get my life back together," Sparks remembered, "and then one of my clients called. She didn't have insurance either. She had to reschedule her appointment because she had managed to get a free mammogram [at the same time as her appointment]. I said, 'A free mammogram?' She said yeah. I asked her for the number. I called it, and I got one of the last free mammograms they had left."

"I was so embarrassed that I was going to get something free," Sparks continued. "I have always been the person who paid. I had never been the person who received. But I didn't have any choice. Something told me I'd better get on top of this."

Sparks headed over to the appointment with her head down. She apologized to everyone: the receptionist, the doctors, the mammogram technicians. "They told me that it was OK," Sparks said, "that this was an annual grant from the Red Cross specifically for people who don't have insurance. I was sure it couldn't be free, but I was resolved to pay whatever I could. They told me not to worry about it, told me that if I needed to come back for another one, that would be free, too."

Sure enough, the call came in a few days. The clinic wanted to do the mammogram again. After that appointment, they told Sparks that she needed to see a surgeon. Sparks thought, "Here we go. This is going to cost me some money. And I don't have any." However, Sparks said, "They gave me a list of places that would see me without insurance. I thought they were going to be awful free clinics, that I would have to wait in line, that I would have to go all the way into Houston and that I would have to take an entire day off of work in order to get it done. I was dreading it."



But then she took a closer look at the list. There were quite a few locations listed. For one of them, she recognized a nearby address. It was called the Rose. She asked about it—was it OK?— and received a hearty yes. She made an appointment with the Rose for a few days later. Nervous now, Sparks called her clients to reschedule them. She took the whole day off.

“When I got to the address, I drove up to this beautiful two-story building,” she remembered. “I had figured I was going to drive up to a little clinic at a strip mall and there would be people waiting outside in line. I thought I must be at the wrong place. But sure enough, it said ‘the Rose’ right there on the side.”

She walked into a gracious space with marble floors and a friendly, professional receptionist. She walked upstairs to a tasteful waiting room where her paperwork was waiting for her, then proceeded into the treatment rooms to get yet another mammogram. The attending doctor informed Sparks that they needed to schedule a biopsy. At this point, she knew she was in trouble.

“I stopped by the desk on my way out to see about my bill, which I was sure of,” Sparks recalled, “These beautiful facilities and top-shelf medical staff could not possibly be free. She waved me on; there was no bill. It was surreal.”

Keeping It Together

While all of this was going on, Sparks was trying to keep herself together in the same way we all do: skydiving. She was on a 4-way

team called Hot Flash with the goal of going to the 2009 Nationals. Proud and private, she didn’t tell anybody outside the team that she was having such scary difficulties. She even made it onto a 100-way record attempt at Skydive Perris, scheduling her biopsy around the trip out to California.

It was about this time that Jump for the Cause came up on Marian’s radar. Jump for the Cause had just hit the \$900,000 mark in breast cancer fundraising, and 2009 was the effort’s last year. “One of my friends was on that jump,” Sparks said. “I remember that she had hit me up because everybody who was on that jump had to bring \$3,000 in donations. There were 181 women on it.”

When Sparks landed in California for the record, it was the weekend just before Jump for the Cause. There were already women converging on Skydive Perris “from all over the place” to get ready for the jump. “I was really impressed with what they were doing,” Sparks said. “I was invited to it, but ironically, because of the breast cancer problems that I was going through, I didn’t feel like I could get involved. I hadn’t been diagnosed yet, but I knew at that point there was a pretty strong chance I was going to be a cancer patient. Honestly, I didn’t know what 2009 was going to bring for me.”

When Sparks got back from California and underwent the biopsy, she got the call she’d been dreading. She needed to come in as soon as possible and see the Rose Medical Director (and co-founder) Dr. Dixie Melillo. She knew

what that meant. “She told me that she had found breast cancer,” Sparks recounted, “and I started crying, of course. Dr. Dixie said it was really, really small; they caught it early. She told me she was sure they could do a lumpectomy and get it out of there. I told her again: ‘I don’t have any insurance. How am I going to pay you?’”

“Dr. Dixie looked at me straight in the eye and said, ‘Don’t worry. I’ve got you covered.’ She offered to be my surgeon. Through my tears, I thought, ‘Oh god, how long can this go on?’ I looked at her and I said, ‘How? How do you have me covered?’ I didn’t know. I didn’t understand it.”

Melillo explained to Sparks that the Rose is a nonprofit organization. For every woman who comes in who has insurance, the organization can help pay for another woman who doesn’t. The Rose runs on government grants, funding from private corporations and from people who raise money for the effort. Dr. Melillo—a one-time high-school dropout who completed her education while she was raising two small children and then went on to become the second woman to graduate from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston as a surgeon—explained to Sparks that she had gotten tired of women coming to her with untreatable, late-stage breast cancer. She and another woman had started the Rose to stem that tide. By the time Sparks walked in its doors, it had been saving lives for 23 years.

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"I just looked at her," Sparks said, "and I told her I couldn't believe that she was going to do this for me. But I told her that when I got well, I was going to raise money for her, too. She smiled and patted me on the shoulder. She said, 'If you win the lottery, come and see me.'"

"At that point," Sparks said, "I had the vision of women skydiving together and raising money for the Rose. And I knew it was going to be a reality."

The surgery went well. Sparks had to undergo a course of radiation, but no chemo. "My best friend Barbara took care of me," Sparks said, smiling. "She wouldn't let me skydive the weekend after my surgery. I said I wanted to go because I only had, like, four little stitches in my breast. She told me I wasn't going. I missed one weekend of skydiving."

Of course, Sparks' team knew what she was going through, so when the radiation started taking a toll, it wasn't a complete surprise. Then the team captain was in an accident. The team didn't end up making it to the Nationals. But Sparks made it through radiation and into remission, which, as she puts it, was "good enough for her."

Giving Back

The next year—2010—Sparks was skydiving with the friend who had participated in the last Jump for the Cause. When Sparks told her that she'd had breast cancer, her friend was all ears when she heard the big idea: to pay the Rose back with an event. Sparks wanted to call it Jump for the Rose. It wasn't long before a cadre of other ladies got involved. The goal was to hold the event that October (Breast Cancer Awareness Month) at Skydive Spaceland-Houston in Rosharon, Texas. There were 39 women on the roster. Mandy Winters came on board to organize a national women's record.

"We got the national record [for largest women's two-point formation skydive, a 38-way] that day," Sparks said, beaming. "When we got it, you could hear all the women screaming with joy in freefall. It was absolutely wonderful."

The first Jump for the Rose raised \$11,382. Marian handed that check to Dr. Melillo personally. "She was crying. I was crying," Sparks said. "She told me that nobody had ever done that before—come back and given her a check. She and [the Rose CEO] Dorothy Gibbins were both there to accept it. It was a great day."



NORMAN KENT

While Sparks' plan was to do one event, the movement she started wasn't finished. Everybody at Spaceland wanted to do it again. Sparks and her team realized that they had to become a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, so they started those slow wheels turning. Since that point, Jump for the Rose has had at least one event every year. The total raised for the Rose so far is just a few dollars shy of \$157,000.

"Jump for the Rose has become an entity all its own," Sparks said, beaming. "I oversee it, and I care for it as a child. I don't have any children, so Jump for the Rose is truly my baby. I work on it all the time."

In addition to the annual Jump for the Rose at Skydive Spaceland-Houston, Sparks helps to facilitate smaller, local Jumps for the Rose at drop zones around the country. The organization also hosts the Pinkfest Boogie, which raises funds with a raucous, co-ed pink bra jump. (Sparks carries around a big bag of pink bras just for this purpose.)

"The support that we have been getting from the skydiving community has been phenomenal," she said. "We've got some wonderful sponsors who are very good to us and very supportive: Skydive Spaceland-Houston, Velocity Sports Equipment, Larsen & Brusgaard, Performance Designs. I can't tell you how many others. I send thank yous to everybody, and I just finally got all 75-plus sent out for the last event. I just can't believe the support."

All this leads to this question: If you live somewhere else, why should you spend your time, money and effort raising funds and awareness for a Houston-based breast cancer clinic? Sparks has a ready answer for that one. "Let me tell you what," she starts, leaning in keenly. "The Rose was the first freestanding breast cancer clinic in the United States. The two women who started it—Dr. Dixie and Dorothy Gibbins—are the reason why insurance companies are required to cover mammograms. They lobbied Congress for that. The Rose is the model for other breast cancer clinics that have sprung up around the United States. And they travel and personally help start up similar clinics all over the world." Also, non-residents can travel to Houston and, if they qualify financially, receive free care at the Rose. No one is turned away.

The next Jump for the Rose event is October 13-14 at Spaceland Houston. If you're inspired to get involved but don't have the funds to be able to donate, there are still ways to help: Reach out to your network to find raffle prizes, organize a mini Jump for the Rose at your own drop zone, scratch together a pink-bra jump. Sparks insists that she's happy to help you get started—just reach out and ask.

The Jump for the Rose motto is simple: "Skydive, have fun, give back." And no one lives that motto more than Sparks. "Skydivers are a very giving bunch of people," she exudes. "They are so glad that they are able to have that life and to be able to jump out of an airplane. They love to give back."

More information about Jump for the Rose is available at jumpfortherose.org.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annette O'Neil, D-33263, is a multidisciplinary air sports athlete: skydiver, BASE jumper, paraglider and speed-wing pilot. Location-independent, she travels the world full-time as a freelance writer and producer. In her spare time, she loves flopping around on a yoga mat and carpetbombing Facebook from Instagram.