

Episode 160: Sue's parachute failed

On October 24, 2015, Sue was with her daughter Jessica, who was 14 years old at the time, and her friend Elise. Sue and Elise were skydiving buddies, and they were doing what they often did on a beautiful Saturday morning – they were going to go jump out of a plane. Since she was 14, Jessica wasn't yet old enough to jump – but she just liked being with her mom and hanging out at the drop zone.

The weather was beautiful, and everything was going fine, until Sue got to about 5000 feet. She tried to make a quick turn just before landing, and things went terribly wrong.

Obviously, Sue made it through that ordeal. But to say she “survived” is a huge understatement. She came back stronger than ever.

This is a Flashback episode. Sue originally told her story on the podcast back in 2019. After you hear about her skydiving crash, I'll play a recent conversation I had with her about what's going on with her now. Spoiler alert – she's still doing some amazing things.

Scott

I want to give people a little bit of background so that they know we have known each other for years, literally, in a couple of different contexts. You and I are part of the Ultra Marathon community - we've both done long ultra marathons. As a matter of fact, I think I actually interviewed you on a different podcast when you finished your first 100-miler, is that right?

Sue

You did!

Scott

That was a few years ago. I know we see each other at races fairly regularly. We've also worked with the homeless. You have a heart for the homeless community like I do. We've gone to places and given out food and blankets and stuff like that - I know we both enjoy doing stuff like that as well.

Sue

We do. Thanks, Scott.

Scott

And not only that, but you are a listener to this podcast, like, from the first episode, right?

Sue

Yes, I love your podcasts! I love podcasts in general.

Scott

Now, you have fulfilled your lifetime dream of coming on this show, right?

Sue

That was one of my bucket list.

Scott

I am happy to help make that happen. I don't think I've ever told you this before, but you are 1 of the 3 most positive-minded people that I know. One of them is my friend Andrea, who I used to work with - I still see her every once in a while. The second one is my mom. The third one is... you! Like, everything you see or do, no matter what it's like, you spin it into something positive and you just seem like you just love life! Is that pretty much your outlook?

Sue

It is. Thank you, Scott. That's nice.

Scott

Okay. Well, let's talk about the events leading up to this day, to this thing that happened - skydiving. How many solo jumps had you done before that day?

Sue

I had done 77 solo jumps before that day. Also, I probably had 8 tandem jumps prior to that.

Scott

77... To an average person, that seems like a lot of jumps, but in the skydiving world, that's still, kind of, a newbie, right?

Sue

Oh, yeah. That's baby steps. I had dreamed of having thousands of jumps, but I didn't get there yet.

Scott

I know you really love skydiving. When you went up the first time - I mean, I've seen videos of people going on their first tandem jump or even their first solo jump - how scared were you the first time you jumped out of a plane?

Sue

I was pretty scared. I think that every skydiver that I know still is, no matter how many jumps they had - there's still that healthy respect for getting up in the plane and doing what you're going to do. In my very first tandem, I was scared. I kept asking my tandem instructor, "Are you sure that we're connected?" The second we fell out of the airplane, I was in heaven - it was the most exhilarating, beautiful, peaceful, chaotic, and serene thing I've ever done, and I instantly fell in love with it. In fact, the very first time I did that was at an Ultra event - the SkyDive Ultra. My first time was in January 2015 when I did a tandem jump and then ran a 50K. So, I did, I think, 3 tandem jumps, then ran a 50K, then did 2 tandem jumps afterward because I just loved it - it was phenomenal!

Scott

So you did five jumps that day?

Sue

Yes.

Scott

Had you planned to do that before or after you just realized that you loved it so much after the first one?

Sue

Absolutely not. I just realized how much I loved it after the first one - that feeling of freedom, speed, chaos, and beauty is just something I can't describe - it's hard to describe.

Scott

I know. I've heard you say before - and I've heard other people say that to other people that have not done it - that you just won't understand until you do it. I have not done it, so I don't understand it. What I find curious, though, is your use of the word 'chaos' right in the middle of beauty, speed, and silence. How does chaos fit into that?

Sue

It's interesting because there are so many things happening at the same time. You're falling through the sky, which is an unnatural feeling. You see the beauty of the earth's curvature. There's a bunch of noise. So, it's chaotic and beautiful all at once. Once the tandem instructor and I came under the canopy, all of that noise just stops and it's just quiet and beautiful. Oh gosh, I miss it.

Scott

Alright. Well, before we get into that day, I got one more question to ask you before we talk about that one jump. In general, what was your pain tolerance like?

Sue

I have a pretty high tolerance for pain - I think many people will tell you that as well. I think anyone who runs ultra-marathons has to have, at least, some high level of pain tolerance.

Scott

Alright. Let's talk about that fateful day when this happened. So, you were with your friend Elise and your daughter, Jessica?

Sue

Yes. My daughter, Jessica, was 14 years old at that time. She absolutely loved coming with me to the drop zone - she loved watching the whole process and really liked the vibe. So, she came along that day. Elise is my friend who I did my very first tandem jump with - we became licensed skydivers together, took the classes together, and did many of our jumps together. So, we went to the drop zone - it was only our second time at this particular drop zone, so we didn't have that many jumps there. I think we had 3 or 4 from the prior weeks

Scott

If this was a drop zone that you didn't normally go to, what made you decide to go there that day?

Sue

I can't specifically remember. I think there was something wrong with the plane that day at the drop zone in Zephyrhills, Florida - I don't really recall. We decided that we wanted to jump, so we'll go to the other drop zone that's, like, 30-45 minutes away.

Scott

And that's in Plant City, Florida?

Sue

Right. In Plant City.

Scott

Were there any weather problems that day?

Sue

No, it was beautiful. It was an October morning - an absolutely beautiful fall morning in Florida. It was a little humid. The sun was just coming up. Dew was on the grass. Anytime you go to a drop zone, there's just this level of excitement or electricity in the air which I absolutely love. So, it was just a beautiful gorgeous morning. I just got a brand new custom TonySuits - a skydiving suit - so, I was pretty excited to wear that. We were ready to have a great day for jumps - we planned to get 5 or 6 jumps in the drop zone. This is definitely a smaller drop zone than Zephyrhills, but it is still a great place to jump in.

Scott

For the average person - someone that has not skydived before - we don't really know what the process is as far as getting your suit on, gear checks, double checks, and all that. Can you take us through that - what happened that day and then how everything played out.

Sue

The jump started out like any other jump. As soon as we got to the drop zone, we turned on our automatic activation devices or AAD, my altimeter, checked my rig from top to bottom, did one more double check before putting on my TonySuits, and then Elise and I both checked each other's gear. Because we're new jumpers, someone else at the drop zone would check our gear as well and do a pin check for us. So, we got on the plane. There was a total of 9 people on the plane. There were 3 tandems - me, Elise, and another jumper by the name of 'Lee' who asked if he could videotape our jump because he was practicing his video skills, and we said 'Absolutely! Come on. Let's do this!' So, we got on the plane. There's this level of excitement on a skydiving plane that you just can't describe - the level of excitement is actually palpable, in my opinion, but there's also a certain fear and respect that what we're about to do is something very serious. As jovial and excited as everyone is, safety is everyone's priority - 100% of the time, it's safety.

As a new jumper, I always double-check my gear and my pin. We talked to the guys on the way up who are tandems - I think it was a bachelor weekend for them - and one of the guys was getting married. It's a pretty small plane. He said, "Hey, do you mind if we do a couple of barrel rolls?" Elise and I looked at each other, our eyes widened real big, and we were like, "Heck, no. That's great. I've never been in a plane that did a barrel roll before." So, they talked to the pilot, and the pilot said, "Sure, we can do that." So, we stood up like a starfish figure in the plane because it's a pretty small plane - Elise and I were standing up with our hands on the roof of the plane, and our feet spread apart. We did three barrel rolls in the plane, which is really kind of neat and exciting. I got a little dizzy for a second, but it was good. Then, we leveled off, got to altitude, the green light went on, the door opened, and we got ready to jump. I think I forgot to mention that, before we got on the plane, there's a landing pattern that you have to do in order to land after you jump, and there's a plan that you need to have in place. When I talked about the landing pattern, we checked the winds and asked someone else at the drop zone to double-check our landing pattern because we're new jumpers and we want to make sure that our plan would be safe and is the right thing to do.

Scott

The idea of a landing pattern is that you want to actually touch down or come in against the wind, is that right?

Sue

That's right. When we're getting to altitude, Elise and I always made the habit of talking about our landing pattern again just to make sure that we're both on the same page and we both know what we're doing. So, the door opened - I love the swishing sound when the door opens and the wind gets onto the plane. We got our helmets on and pushed the eyesight down. Lee already left the plane but he's hanging out on the side waiting for Elise and I to make the jump. It's funny because you don't really jump out of a plane - you just, kind of, fall out of it - and it's the most wonderful feeling in the world. I don't know how to describe it. It's just fabulous. It's exhilarating. It's beautiful. So Elise and I jumped on a gorgeous morning - the sun had come up and it wasn't too hot yet.

At this particular drop zone, there are pine trees that are very, very tall. The drop zone that I'm used to jumping at doesn't have pine trees. I know that any obstacle like a pine tree, a building, or anything will have turbulence associated with it. So, I was worried, initially, about the pine trees - it hasn't overcome any of my thoughts at all. So, we jumped and were having a great time. I felt like the wind had shifted a little bit - it just felt different - and I saw Elise was farther away from me than where she usually is. I was thinking to myself, "Well, that's kind of weird. Why is she way over there? I'm over here." I'm not under canopy yet. I would be under the canopy at about 5000 feet, usually - I won't pull any lower than that. When I saw that she was far away, I'm like, "Oh goodness." I was looking down and looking around at the ground to see where I'm supposed to land. I was worried about hitting the trees. I remember something in class that we took - if you look and focus on something, you'll end up going that way. So, like, I didn't want to look at the trees, but I'm still worried about it I'm worried that if I come down too close to the trees, I'll hit trees - that's what I was worried about. So, I decided not to come down lower.

So, I changed my landing pattern, which was definitely the wrong thing to do. I thought I would come up a little higher above the tree, so I wouldn't hit them. When I hovered over the trees, obviously, my planning pattern is going to elongate more than what it would have initially. It was still a beautiful skydive, so I'm not overly concerned and worried. Under the canopy, it would be quiet. As soon as I came over the trees - this all happens pretty quickly - I realized, "Oh my goodness, I really don't have that much of a runway left." I was still coming down pretty fast. I know that I still have to hang or turn to land properly. There's a barn in front of me and I thought, "Shoot. If I still come down as fast as I'm coming, I'm going to hit that barn. If I hit that barn, I'll probably not going to live." So, it's a bad thing. All of this happens in, like, a split second. I said, "Okay. Obviously, I want to live and I'm going to turn left." So, when you're turning left, you're moving your left arm to pull the cells so that the canopy would turn left. So as I did that, I looked up for a split second to check and see what my canopy was doing - the last 3 or 4 cells of my canopy - before it collapse. I knew something bad was going to happen. What happens next is really slow - like, it happened really fast but, in my mind, I can remember every single detail and it's really bizarre. The absolute first thought and pervading thought of everything that happened was of my daughter - like, her face just was there just in my head - and all I could think about was Jessica and that she's here. I just couldn't stop thinking about her. So, as I was falling to the ground, I could see her face and her playing on the beach as a baby - it was just really bizarre.

Scott

So, this was like one of those things where you're, maybe, about to die and your life flashes before your eyes. In your case, it was your daughter flashing.

Sue

Yes. The absolute only thought that I had was of her - it was weird and just bizarre. So, as I was falling to the ground - this was happening fast - all of a sudden, I have this hyper-focus, this myopic view of what I was going to hit. I could see the individual blades of grass, I could see the little specks of dirt on the grass that I was going to hit, and that all happens in a second. So, I hit the ground and, I think, I blacked out for a second. I remember hitting the ground and hearing a thud - like, my body just hit the ground. Then, I blacked out for a few seconds. When I opened my eyes, I was like, "Oh, my goodness, I am alive! Thank the Lord, I'm alive!" I couldn't have been happier - I absolutely could not have been happier. At that point in time, it didn't matter if whatever was broken, hurt, or needed to be fixed because I was alive and I would be able to see my daughter again.

So, I hit the ground. I think Lee had already landed. Someone called '911'. Elise was landing. All I could think of is, "My daughter is here. She's 14. I'm not sure yet if she knows that it was me who had a bad landing. I don't want her to see me or hear me. I don't want her to hear me in pain." Once Elise got to me, all I could do was moan - there was no screaming in pain, it was just moaning - because that was all I could do. I couldn't move my left side. I could wiggle my toes, which I was very happy about. I thought, "Okay, if I can wiggle my toes, that means I'm probably not paralyzed." I couldn't move the left side of my body without being in excruciating pain. I had my full-faced skydiving helmet still on. When Lee came running over, all of a sudden, I said, "Please, I got a little panic. Take this helmet off because I couldn't see. It was all dirt in it." So he took that off.

Scott

Were you facing downward or upward?

Sue

I was facing downward. When you take skydiving lessons, they teach you how to land a parachute. If you ever have to land and you're not on your feet, then you have to land on your side. So I landed on my side, thankfully. After Lee took my helmet off, I said, "Lee, my daughter's 14. She has long blonde hair. She's wearing jeans or shorts and a T-shirt or whatever. If you see a young lady come over who looks like that, tell me and I will stop moaning because I don't want her to hear me in pain. I want her to know that I'm okay." So he said, "Okay. She's like 50 feet... 20 feet..." When she came over, I said, "Honey, mom's fine. Can you go to the car and get my driver's license?" So she went to the car. As soon as she was out of earshot, I would moan again because the pain was just excruciating. When she came back, I said, "Thanks, honey. Now, can you go get my sunglasses?" And she would go to the car and do that. Then, the third time, I asked her to go get my insurance card because I knew that the paramedics were coming. I reassured her that I was okay, but I knew she was worried. I knew my friend, Elise, was worried. Elise was there and I asked her to call Bill and tell him that I had an accident but I'm alive - Bill's my husband - I'll be okay. Jessica has his number so you guys can just call Bill. So, they did all that. I had my brand new rig on, so I said, "Lee, I don't want them cutting off my rig. Let's see if you could get the rig off so that they don't cut it. So, Lee helped. I couldn't move, so he undid the chest strap, undid the structure on my legs, and lifted the rig so that the paramedics didn't cut that. It seemed like it took them forever to get there - it probably didn't. I was in a lot of pain.

Scott

Where was the pain you were feeling at that time?

Sue

It was my back, my leg - like, my whole pelvis area from my abdomen down was hurting. The most pain was really in my back and my pelvis. It seemed like it took paramedics a long time to get there - I'm sure it didn't. It was the Hillsborough County paramedics who came - there were just absolutely wonderful. I could hear them trying to figure out how are they going to roll me over onto the board. I know that when they do that, it's going to be excruciatingly painful, so I tried to negotiate with them and said, "Wait, can't you just, like, leave me on my stomach and do it that way?" They're like, "No, we really need to turn you over."

Scott

You knew that even though you're telling them that?

Sue

I knew it. When they do that quick body assessment to see what's broken or whatever, I was, like, "Please, don't squish my pelvis or my abs. Like, don't do that because that's gonna hurt." He was, like, "Look, I got to." So, that was extremely painful. I think, probably, the only time I screamed out in pain when my daughter was present was during that time when they did that initial assessment. So, they kind of flipped me over - I don't remember exactly how, but I remember it being very painful. I don't know how they did it, but they flipped me over and I couldn't put my left leg down in a straight position because it was too painful. So, I asked him to move my leg up. So, they found a pillow and put a pillow. They kept telling me, "It's gonna be bumpy when we get you on the stretcher and into the ambulance." I was, like, "Just give me something for the pain. I'll take the bumps, but just give me something to take the edge off a little bit."

Scott

I'm kind of surprised. When some people get into so much pain, they just pass out, right? But you weren't that fortunate, I guess?

Sue

No. I don't know. I want to be aware of everything and I want to be in control of - at least, try to be in control - whatever I could at that point in time because I was just helpless. Like, I can't move, I can't walk, and I can't do anything, but I want to try to be in control. I asked them where they were taking me and they said, "The closest trauma center is in Lakeland, so we'll be taking you there." When I thought about it, if I had more wits, I would have asked them to take me to Tampa General only because my house is, like, 1.5 hours away from Lakeland - it would be a long drive every day for my husband to take. So, they took me to Lakeland. The paramedics were just fabulous. I can't remember the paramedic's name, but I remember him telling me that he had 5 kids. I can remember the driver apologizing for every little bump on the road - we had to drive over some railroad tracks and I can remember her just apologizing profusely - because any movement was really, really painful. So, they gave me as many pain meds as they could, but they couldn't give me a whole lot until I got to the hospital.

So we got to Lakeland Memorial. Some of the good things about being a trauma case - or whatever you want to call it - is that you get, like, speedy medical assessments, triage, CAT scans, X-rays, bloodwork, and all that stuff done in a second. So, they wheeled me in, did a quick assessment, then immediately took me to CAT scan, X-rays, and whatever.

I saw my husband arrive. So, I was so grateful that my daughter who was with me - who refused to drive in the ambulance, who followed my friend, Elise, in my car to Lakeland - had her dad. He looked pretty freaked out and she doesn't want to talk about it, which is okay. Anyway, I think she was traumatized that day. I think she knew how close things could have gone

differently. I think if I had landed a little bit differently - even just 0.5 - 1.0 inch different - things would have definitely. If I landed on my chest, I wouldn't be doing a podcast with you today, I'm sure.

Scott

That was your concern at that time - you didn't want her to be traumatized.

Sue

Yes. Yeah.

Scott

But even though you minimize that as much as you could, for a 14-year-old kid, that's not something they should see - maybe, some adults would be traumatized by it.

Sue

Yes. But, she's resilient and she's a fabulous child. So, after the initial assessment, after they looked at the CAT scan and the X-rays, the doctor said, "Look, let's hope for a broken hip and not broken pelvis and stuff. Let's just hope for that." I'm like, "Okay, let's hope for that." By that time, they gave me some pretty good drugs, so I was like, "That's great!" So, it was very quick. Within an hour of me getting to the hospital - I didn't know what to expect - I can remember the doctor said, "Okay, we're gonna take you to a room now." I was like, "What do you mean? You're gonna take me to a room? Like, it's not what I expected. I expected that I would be able to get up, walk away, and that it would just be a little boobo. That was it." So, they took me to the trauma floor at Lakeland Memorial, which is always an interesting place - I called it 'House of Horrors' only because there's some pretty bad stuff that goes on such as bad accidents, car accidents, motorcycle wrecks, people moaning and crying. It was just an interesting time to spend a week on the trauma floor, but it's not something that I would recommend anyone to do for entertainment.

Anyhow, they took me to a room and I was sharing a room with a woman who got in a motorcycle accident. So they dubbed our room, 'The Female Daredevil Room'. So, I got to the room. They're not sure yet whether I need surgery. Initially, they said, "No, you don't need surgery." And that was a Saturday. I was, like, "Good." They said, "We'll have someone else read the X-rays, but we think you're good. You just need to just rest right now." I was, like, "Okay." So, they gave me pain meds - I was still in a lot of pain - and they would come in and try to move parts of my body but I still couldn't move - I still could not move the left side of my body at all because I was still in a lot of pain.

Scott

When you said you couldn't move, you weren't paralyzed, you couldn't move because it would be too painful?

Sue

Yes, that's right. I couldn't move because it was so painful. I didn't know how I made it through that first night because they would come in and - the nursing staff or whoever, I don't know what their titles were - try to move me but I couldn't get out of bed. So, I had a bedpan and they would try to, like, move up my pelvis to put the bedpan on there. I was like, "No, you guys don't understand! I would scream in pain and I would be sweating. It is pretty bad." So, in Sunday morning rounds, the trauma doctors came in, went to every patient, asked them questions, and did an assessment. I said, "Look, every time when I breathe, if I move in a certain way, there's something that's not right, it's like an electrical shock that I was feeling. It's very, very painful."

So, they came back in a little bit later and said, "Okay, you're going to have surgery today. We're going to put your leg in traction to allow the swelling to go down or something." I can't remember exactly what they said. So, that was Sunday.

I had some skydiving and ultra-running friends who came to the hospital. We were just hanging out. My surgery was scheduled for four o'clock on Sunday. I can remember getting wheeled down to the surgery center and being the only person in there - it was just probably one of the loneliest times ever - it was just me. I was thinking, "What's going to happen? What could go wrong? Am I going to walk again? Will I run again? Will I be able to do the things that I've always loved doing?" I had asked my trauma surgeon that before and he said, "I don't know. I can't promise you anything, but you likely won't be able to do all of those things." By the way, the injury I had was that I had broken my pelvis in 4 places - my sacrum and my L4-L5 transverse process. Once they had someone else look at the X-rays and the CAT scans, I think, it was more than what they initially thought. So, I had that surgery on Sunday. They put my leg in traction, which was pretty archaic. When I got back to my room and looked at it, there's this steel rod put through your femur right above your kneecap. Then, there's, like, wires that come out of that, that attach a rope to a sandbag at the end of my bed. So, I kept looking at it, like, "That is really weird. Like, that's really bizarre and very archaic." And every time someone walked into the room - because I was the first bed - I'd say, "Please don't hit that sandbag. Like, whatever you do, do not hit that sandbag or accidentally rub up against it when you're getting to the other bed or moving something for me."

So, I still couldn't move until I had another surgery scheduled on Tuesday, so it was an interesting time. I don't remember some of it because of the good, great drugs I had from being hospitalized. I just started wondering, "Am I going to be able to do all the things I love?" There's absolutely no doubt that I'll be able to do it - even if the doctor says I can't, I'll definitely overcome this and be able to do it. Then I started wondering, "Well, what's the goal for recovery?" The doctor said, "Look, you're going to be in a wheelchair for a while. Then, you'll graduate from wheelchair to walker, from walker to crutches, from 2 crutches to 1 crutch, and then you'll be able to bear your own body weight, but it's going to take quite a while for you to get that done. You'll likely be in a wheelchair for probably 6 months, and then a walker and crutches for 3-4 months after that, so it's gonna be a long recovery. When they were telling me this, I'm like, "Dude, you don't know me."

I was looking at my husband - we had this nonverbal communication thing going on. He knows me and he knows that I'm just not gonna settle for that - that's just not how I roll. So, it's a mental decision to get through this - you're going to recover and you're going to come back no matter what anyone says, you're going to just come back stronger, much more knowledgeable, and better than you were before. Then, you just live life and look at things a lot differently. I had my second surgery on Tuesday, where they put a 7-inch steel screw in my back, which went through my pelvis in my sacrum, which is still there. So seven inches, if you imagine, is pretty big enough to show you the X-ray of it - I think that it was posted on my Instagram account from that time. Anyhow, it's interesting because you can just see how big it is. So, I had that inserted and my leg was taken out of traction - thank goodness! The very next day, that Wednesday, they wanted me to get out of bed. Now, my husband lives 1.5 hours away from Lakeland Memorial Hospital, so he would drop our daughter off at school, run 1.5 hours to see me at the hospital, stay for like two hours, drive back, pick Jessica up from school, make her dinner, and then come back to the hospital. So, it was pretty stressful for him.

On Wednesday, they said, "We want you to get out of bed and try to move from the bed to the chair." It probably took me, like, 45 minutes just to sit my body up and move my feet over to the

side of the bed. I was sweating as if I had just run 50 miles - it was so much work and it was so hard. So, I was finally able to just sit up and move my legs over to the side of the bed. Then, they said, "Okay, let's try to move to the chair." So, they helped me or they showed me ways to do that. Once I got to the chair, I was so exhausted and I just thought to myself, "Holy cow, this is gonna be harder than I thought, because it just took me, like, forever to get from the hospital bed to the chair and I was exhausted beyond anything I've ever felt before. How am I going to get back?" I have to get back into that hospital bed! Anyhow, it's just funny - I don't know. The little tiny things that you take for granted - brushing your teeth with running water, taking showers, and all of those things that you don't get to do when you're bound in a hospital bed.

Scott

Well, from what I can see, based on what you wrote about this and just talking with you, your general attitude throughout the recovery was determined and optimistic. How much did your big attitude affect your recovery?

Sue

In my opinion, it has to be at least 90%. I know that your body reacts to how your mind thinks and how you perceive your body. So, if I thought, "Oh my goodness, I'm never going to be able to run again, I'm never going to be able to bike again, I'm never going to be able to climb and do these other things that I love to do," then I'll not be able to do that. But if I say, "I'm going to run these, I'm going to be able to do this, I'm going to be able to run, bike, climb mountains, I'm gonna be able to do all of these things," then I'm going to do it. You just have to have that mindset, otherwise, you're defeating yourself already - you're setting yourself up for failure before you've even started and that just doesn't make any sense - and it's just a lot of negative energy that goes nowhere.

Scott

Now, the jump and this whole thing happened 3 years ago. Are you fully recovered now?

Sue

So I was supposed to be in a wheelchair for 6 months and then months for another recovery. The accident happened in October 2015. Well, a year after, in November 2016, I ran a 100-mile race and finished.

Scott

That was at "Fort Clinch"?

Sue

Nope, that one was at "Save The Daylight." So, Save The Daylight was on November 4, 2016 - just a year and two weeks after my accident. They said, "You're not gonna be able to do this," but I did. Then, just to make sure that I wasn't dreaming, 1.5 months later, I ran another 100-mile race in SkyDive Ultra and finished that as well. So, I just wanted to make sure that I could do it.

Scott

I think you, kind of, proved that point. And not to overemphasize this point too much but, also, since the accident, you did a little bit of mountain climbing, right?

Sue

I did. It was trekking, really. I did trek to Everest base camp.

Scott

We're talking about Mount Everest, right? I mean, you just brushed it off, "Oh yeah, I went to Everest base camp." I mean, that's just getting to base camp. What's the altitude on that?

Sue

Base Camp is 17,600 feet, but you have to go up a little to come down to the base camp. So, I think it was 18,600 down to 17,600. I did that for an organization called "Radiating Hope", which helps build colleges or radiation centers in third-world countries, so it was more for them. Also, I got some satisfaction from that as well - just pushing forward and reaching goals.

Scott

There are multiple topics here that I could interview you about. Actually, you trekked to Everest with our mutual friend, Karen. I was hoping to actually have her on the podcast to talk about that.

Sue

Yes, she had a much more interesting trip than I did.

Scott

It was very interesting. Yes, I saw that - you guys posted it on Facebook - it was quite an adventure. So hopefully, we'll get her on here at some point to talk about that. Looking back at this, what could you have done differently to avoid that crash landing or whatever? Would a more experienced skydiver have the same result? Or could you have done something?

Sue

Accidents happen. I think it's my own inexperience in jumping. I think a more experienced skydiver would have realized that they didn't have to change their landing pattern and that the trees that I was trying to avoid really weren't going to be a danger to me. When I realized I was going to either hit the barn and kill myself, I really made a sharp left turn to avoid the barn and that's obviously what collapsed the left side of my parachute, and pushed me to the ground. So, it's just my inexperience.

Scott

Have you ever gone back to that spot where you landed?

Sue

No, I haven't. I've gone back to my home drop zone, which is Zephyrhills just to get back out there. I haven't jumped yet - I made a promise to my family that I would wait until our daughter graduated from high school before I would jump again. Now, she's graduating this year. As much as I love it, I'm not sure if I want to do that again.

Scott

You gotta have your brain go through that whole thought process, right?

Sue

Yeah. It's just a part of my life that - I don't know. I sold my equipment and I was just not ready yet - I don't know if I ever will be. I'd rather climb mountains and try to do other things.

Scott

You mentioned that Lee was on the plane. He went out first and video-taped the first part of that jump. I'm going to have that video on the website for this episode so people can watch that if they want to. Also, I'm going to have a link to the blog post that you did that outlined everything that happened that day as well. So, if people are interested in reading that, they can do that. That'll be at the website - WhatWasThatLike.com

Sue

Excellent.

Scott

Sue, I'm glad you made it. I'm glad you are here to tell the story. I wish you the best in your continuing adventures.

Sue

Thanks, Scott. I'll see you out there helping the homeless soon.

Scott

Sue, it's great to see you again.

Sue

Oh, it's so good to see you too, Scott. Thank you.

Scott

You and I can see each other as we're doing this, but we're not recording the video, so the listeners don't get to see you, but they get to hear you. When we recorded that podcast conversation, it was in early 2019, and that was about 3 years after the skydiving accident. You obviously recovered a lot more quickly than what all the medical people forecasted. Now, we're doing this update today and it's late 2023. It's been eight years. How are you doing today?

Sue

Oh my gosh. I have no complaints. I just take every day as it gives. I mean, nothing has stopped me from doing and pursuing the things that I love and with passion. Yeah, I've done a lot of things since our last discussion.

Scott

I can't wait to hear about it. You and I kind of keep up with each other on Facebook a little bit, but it's funny you started out saying, "I have no complaints." I can picture you in a hospital bed in a full-body cast and you would still have no complaints.

Sue

Yeah, there's nothing to complain about.

Scott

So what happened since then?

Sue

Okay. That was before COVID. My memory is very good before that. I think right before that, I went to Nepal after the skydiving accident, did several things, and hiked to Everest Base Camp. That was beautiful, fabulous. I tell you that just because there was a secondary trip to Nepal that I want to talk about.

Scott

I think, in the podcast, we talked about your first one.

Sue

Okay. That's great.

Scott

I didn't know that you went a second time.

Sue

So the first time that I went to Nepal there on the trek, there was this beautiful mountain that I was just instantly drawn to. The mountain's name is Ama Dablam and Ama Dablam means Mother Mountain or Mother's Necklace. It's obviously a huge mountain. The mountains around it— you'll see Everest and Lhotse and a bunch of other mountains, but there was something about that mountain that attracted me and I had to go back. So I'll skip forward a couple of years.

A few months ago, I went back to Nepal and had to get to Ama Dablam. I had to put my feet on that mountain and there was something spiritual about it. There was a need that I had. So I went to Nepal and hiked the trail up to Ama Dablam, which is a similar trail as Everest Base Camp, and then you just kind of split. We got to one of the mountaintops. When you're doing those treks, you stay in tea houses, and there's usually no electricity, no heat, and you're sleeping in all layers of clothes. It's cold.

So we got up to where you could actually see the base of Ama Dablam and it started snowing really bad. We got caught in this horrible snowstorm and ice storm and our guide didn't think it was safe for us to move forward because of the weather. So I was disappointed. That morning, it had stopped snowing, so we went forward just a little bit - maybe a quarter of a mile - so I could at least be at the base of the mountain. I bowed the mountain, kissed the mountain, and I felt so much better. I felt like that was what I needed to do. There was an awakening in me that that needed to happen, and that happened at that moment.

Scott

So because of that, you don't feel like you need to have to go back and do it again?

Sue

I don't know. Nepal has a place in my heart. I'll definitely go back. I just may go to a different mountain and go a different route. We didn't get to climb up Ama Dablam, which was fine. One of my best friends and I went. We ended up taking a flight to South Nepal and went to, I want to say, a safari where there were elephants and just tiger signs, warning signs, rhinoceros and, like, hippopotamus. It was beautiful. It's part of Nepal that I never imagined I would like. We ended up riding elephants. The elephant that we were on was a female elephant and she was vibrating, talking to other elephants. I don't know. I had no idea that elephants talk to one another that way. She was talking to her other sisters. It was beautiful. I loved it.

Scott

You're like a Nepal travel agent trying to sell trips there.

Sue

Oh my gosh, Scott, I don't know the people of Nepal - the Nepalese people. There is something so kind and genuine and beautiful and giving about what they do and just how they treat others, and it's something that endears me to them, and I try to be like that.

Scott

Yeah. Why can't we all be that way?

Sue

Yeah.

Scott

When your skydiving accident happened, your daughter, Jessica was just 14 years old. Do you guys talk about that at all sometimes? What does she remember about that day?

Sue

So she doesn't like to talk about it and neither does my husband. I think they were traumatized by it. There was a point where we weren't sure whether I was going to live or not. So no, she's not interested. I tried to talk to her about it. She's not interested in it, and that's okay. She's into therapy and all of those things, and it was a difficult time for her.

Scott

Sure, yeah. And she was there when it happened.

Sue

She was there, which just kind of amped it up a little bit.

Scott

How old is she now? What's she doing?

Sue

She is 22 and she is a first-grade teacher in Florida, but she's actually looking to go to nursing school, so we'll see what happens. Who knows? She's young. She'll figure it out.

Scott

Have you jumped out of a plane again?

Sue

I have not jumped out of a plane. I had to promise my family that I wouldn't do that. However, I have been on the plane with skydivers to experience it, and I definitely want to do it again, Scott. It is the most beautifully chaotic, peaceful thing ever. I love skydiving. I miss the sky. Every day I wake up and look up at the sky, I just have fond memories of that. When I fly places for work or travel, I always look out the window and I'm like, "Oh, if I just had a parachute, what I could do..."

Scott

You probably don't want to say that out loud.

Sue

Well, that's my husband. That's probably one of the hardest promises I've ever had to keep - saying I wouldn't pursue something that I love so much. But I don't think I could do that to them again and have them worry that something could go wrong. I just can't.

Scott

Yeah, I think we understand that. Since the initial podcast, you and your husband Bill have moved. You had a new house built in this amazing place in South Florida. Can you describe that community?

Sue

Yeah, so we're in a place called Babcock Ranch. It's also called the Solar City. It's 100% solar. So we have an elementary school, middle school, and high school. We have a full gym. We have Publix, which is our rest or grocery store. We have doctor's offices, clinics, and vet clinics. We have restaurants all run by solar. Self-sustainable. We were actually in the path of Ian last year.

Scott

The big hurricane...

Sue

Yeah. The big hurricane took an almost direct hit - we're about 10 miles offshore near Fort Myers - and we fared well. They built the community to withstand a Category 5 hurricane. The community is built with natural fawn and flora. The trees that we lost ironically were not natural or native to Florida, but the community pretty much went unscathed. We had some people lose some screens on their lanai, but we were very thankful and grateful, and there's still a lot of devastation down here that people just don't see.

Scott

Yeah, we saw it when it was happening. Originally, the path was to come directly at us in the Tampa Bay area. I mean, it sounds selfish. I was glad it didn't hit us, but I hate to see all the people who had so much damage.

Sue

It's funny. I begged our daughter, "Please, who lives near you? Please come down to Fort Myers area. I don't want you in the path of the hurricane." So she did. And then, it changed at the last minute, and she was like, "Mom, thanks."

Scott

I visited you at your home when you still lived here in the Tampa area. At that time, you had one dog, Romeo. And since then you've added a couple more family members. Can you talk about your dogs? It's an unusual breed.

Sue

I have three dogs. I have Romeo - who's the oldest - who's 7, Juliet, who's 3, and we have Puck who just turned a year. All three of them are Australian Labradoodles. So that's Cocker, Lab, and Poodle. Romeo and Puck are about 70 pounds and Juliet's a little more than 45 pounds. The boys definitely pick on Juliet, but I'm her protector and I love them. They are everything to me.

Scott

Lots of energy...

Sue

Yeah, lots of energy. They're just fabulous. I grew up with cats and never thought I would be this much of a dog person, but I keep looking now at how many dogs can I have.

Scott

Is there a limit? I don't think there's a limit.

Sue

There is a limit. I think our HOA has a limit.

Scott

Oh.

Sue

I think we're at the limit. I think three's the limit.

Scott

So it's not really the perfect community then, is it?

Sue

No, it's not. That's right.

Scott

What is still on your bucket list? I mean, it's hard for me to imagine you sitting on the couch watching Wheel of Fortune.

Sue

Yeah, I'm not a sitter at all. Since our last podcast, I've probably completed maybe 6 more 100-mile races. I completed a 150-mile race and I'm training right now for a 200-mile race in North Georgia in March.

Scott

What's the name of that race?

Sue

It's the Canebrake 200. I definitely have always wanted to do a 200 after I finished my 150.

Scott

Doesn't everybody?

Sue

I don't know. Maybe. I was scheduled to do it last year in December - the race is in March - but then, in December, I was skateboarding and dropped into a bowl at the skateboard park and broke my leg. So I had to stop training and kind of wait for that to heal. It's all healed and I'm back to running again.

Scott

Oh my gosh.

Sue

I think that's what my husband said. He's like, "What..."

Scott

So now, do you have to promise to not skateboard anymore?

Sue

Well, I won't skateboard anymore until after my race.

Scott

Well, if you ever decide, there's a race here that I crew somebody every year. It's the Pinellas Trail Challenge. If you ever decide to do that, I'd be happy to be your crew.

Sue

You know what, Scott? That might be next year. Yes.

Scott

Awesome. Well, let me know. Yeah.

Sue

And you have your bike and you—

Scott

Yeah, I do a bike crew. I'd pull a trailer with a cooler with ice and water and everything you need.

Sue

That's great. Maybe you want to travel across the US on that with me and be my crew?

Scott

Are you seriously considering a coast-to-coast?

Sue

I would love to, and I keep begging my husband. I'm like, "Honey, let's just get an RV. You can stop every 10 miles and meet me every 10 miles," but he's not interested in that yet. We'll see.

Scott

Kind of boring for the driver, sort of.

Sue

I would imagine, but he could have the three dogs with him.

Scott

Oh, yeah. A lot of podcast time though. A lot of hours.

Sue

Yes indeed.

Scott

Well, I have to say, when I did my 100, I said, "Okay, that's it. There's no way I'm doing a 200." So you've got a lot of respect. Man, that's going to be pretty awesome when you finish that.

Sue

Yes, thank you. I'm super excited. It's not going to be easy, but then nothing worth gaining is easy, right?

Scott

That's right. The harder it is, the bigger the reward at the end.

Sue

That's right. I need to work hard and dig deep.

Scott

It's great talking with you again, and I'm sure the listeners are happy to hear what's new with you. Good luck in all your future bucket list endeavors.

Sue

Thanks, Scott. I appreciate it.

Scott

You can see pictures of Sue, her husband Bill, and their daughter Jessica – as well as their 3 wonderful dogs – in the episode notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/160.

Here's a kind of a weird question. Do you work in a prison? Or do you know someone who works in a prison? More specifically, a prison where the death penalty is being practiced. I'd love to do an episode with the prison employee who is in charge of executions. Here in the US, capital punishment is still a legal penalty in 27 states, but not all of those states actually do it. This year – 2023 – Florida, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas have all executed prisoners. So I think it would be really interesting to hear from the person who handles that process. So if you know someone like that, I'd like to hear from them.

We have a podcast review that was left by Chris, and our good friend AI has agreed to read it for us –

Chris Knighton

This is Chris Knighton. I really enjoyed the episode, Tessi Heard a Tree Fall. When I started playing this episode, I wasn't sure where it was going, but the narration captivated me, and I couldn't stop listening.

The host and guest brought on a feeling of nostalgia for me when describing the California Mountain West, and when the guest began to share her story of what happened one night when she was camping, I, as a fellow outdoors and camping lover, couldn't turn it off. This podcast transports you into the world of the guests who tell their stories and makes you think, what if that was me?

Scott

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And here we are with the newest Listener Story. Some of these are long, some are short. This one's kind of short. Listener Stories are sent in by – you guessed it – listeners. And usually they're like 5-10 minutes long, nothing fancy, just something that happened to you that you think people might find interesting.

You can record it on your phone and email it to me.

This week's story is about a child predator, so listen with discretion.

Stay safe, and I'll be back here in a week, with an all-new episode.

(Listener Story)

Hi, my name is Lexi. When I was around 15 years old - I'm 20 now - I had a friend who was also 15 and she had a boyfriend who was 26 years old. At the time when I was 15, I honestly knew it was wrong, but I didn't realize how long it was until I got older and he would buy me and my friends alcohol and weed in order for us to keep quiet about their little vacations they would go on. The bad part about it— well, I mean, the whole thing is bad, but the extra bad part is that he was her older sister's baby daddy's older brother. So they would see each other at, like, family gatherings and stuff, and they would just have to keep it quiet. But the crazy part is that they're still together to this day. It's just crazy to me because when she gets older, she's going to realize that he is a child predator because he will go for somebody that is, or was her age when he did that to her.