

Celebrating 80 years at 14,000 feet

■ At nearly three miles in the sky, Evelyn Straub skydives to spice up life and open new chapter

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ELBERTA — Evelyn Straub decided that on her 80th birthday, she would do something a little out of the ordinary, freefall to the earth from 14,000 feet and return to safety by way of a nylon parachute.

"I just had my birthday and I wanted to do something to really spice my life up," Straub said in an interview

prior to her big jump on Saturday. "I already had this in my mind, but I didn't tell any of the kids."

And when she did tell her sons and daughters, one said to her, "mother you're going to break your legs," but her daughter offered some support, "go ahead if you want to do it, live it up."

Although, she could expect a pillar of support since her son Kent,

SEE B'DAY JUMP, PAGE 14A



Continued from Page 1A

42, who has jumped once before, would take the leap with her.

"I brought a tape over to her of my jump and she told me that she wanted to try to it," Kent said, but Evelyn admitted that she withheld the idea from the family until she was completely sure it was going to happen.

Once she revealed her intention, Evelyn said they were split on the notion of her actually skydiving, including her husband, Erwin, who turned 83 in March.

"Personally, she's 80 years old...and your legs and bones aren't like a 12-year-old," Erwin said to the reporter, just before Evelyn boarded the Pilatus PC-6 Porter airplane at Emerald Coast Skydiving's drop zone in Elberta, the second oldest continuously operating drop zone in the U.S., active for 39 years.

"If you hit hard, you could break a bone," said Erwin, a retired high school gym teacher. "I'm a little concerned, but she said, 'ahh heck, I'm 80 years old, I'll be fine.' And you know, I felt I just kind of had to warn her before the jump."

Evelyn, a former Foley swim coach and originally from St. Louis, spun it a different way.

"We celebrated our 58th wedding anniversary recently. We're old fogies when you're married to the same guy for that long," she said. "And well, when you're this age, what do you have to lose. We just don't want to sit on a sunny beach when we go, and my kids say, 'well you are going to do whatever you want.'"

And she was in experienced hands on the day when she would be strapped to another skydiver during the tandem jump, an essential safety mea-

sure for newcomers to the art of the freefall.

Jim Horak Jr., chief skydiving instructor, said that newcomers have to do at least three tandem jumps before soloing.

Horak's family owns the drop zone property, a sprawling open tract off County Road 95, which also serves as the take-off and landing point for the Porter.

Horak has had a few other death-defying gentle man and ladies in their 70's and 80's, including a Swiss who insisted that he had to wear Switzerland's flag on his chest.

Slightly after 1 p.m., Evelyn boarded the single-prop Porter on her way to a daunting 14,000 feet, which takes about 20 minutes to reach.

Just before takeoff, she joked, "Well when you're this old, you don't have much else to lose so you're not scared."

Her son Kent admitted that he was a little nervous, and that he needed a big gulp of water before getting on board.

Her husband Erwin said, "Well, I'm assuming my luck can't be that bad."

Nearly a half-hour later, Erwin spotted the pink nylon of Evelyn's open chute, thousands of feet above, as she slowly descended to the ground below.

She soon landed without a hitch and mightily hugged her tandem partner.

After a brief moment to gather her bearings, she said: "Oh you got to do it, it's a rush.

"When you first open the door (to the airplane), the air is coming in and it's hard to get your feet out. Then, all of a sudden, you're out and it's happening. It's fantastic!"

The day after the jump, Evelyn said she may do it again, and added, "It wasn't so bad."