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ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



ItChangedMyLife

# You'll never walk again, she was told – but she did

Karina Hollekim suffered horrific injuries in a skydiving accident, but she never lost hope



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It was a beautiful morning in August 2006.

Together with several skydivers, Karina Hollekim was in a Cessna 10,000 feet above Lake Geneva, waiting to hurl herself off in a demonstration jump at the Paragliding World Cup in Villeneuve, Switzerland.

The 30-year-old was in high spirits; she was in the company of good friends and had also met and flirted with an Argentinian paraglider the evening before.

"It rained that morning but now the sun was peeking through the clouds and the sunbeams were beautiful. I was thinking to myself I was the luckiest girl on the planet. I was able to do the things I love, travel and meet all types of fascinating people," she says.

She leapt from the plane in her wingsuit, camera attached to her helmet and a canister of smoke attached to her ankle so that the crowds below could see her gliding in the sky.

The jump was easy-peasy for the Base jumper and free skier compared to other death-defying ones she had done in the past from buildings such as Shanghai's 88-storey Jin Mao Tower, or the Hand of Fatima, Mali's highest peak at 1,155m.

Base jumping is an extreme sport that involves parachuting from four types of fixed objects which make up the acronym: buildings, antennae, spans and earth formations.

"Everything was perfect. I could hear the applause of the thousands of spectators below. Then it was time to open the parachute," says Ms Hollekim, who was supposed to land in a certain place because she was filming.

The parachute failed to deploy properly, sending her hurtling at 100kmh towards tragedy.

"I've lost friends in exactly the same way. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to die, this is it.'"

She put her hands up in front of her face as her body hit a huge rock. "Rocks are not something you want to hit but this one saved my life. I got an immediate stop. It didn't hit my back and my head and that's the only reason I'm still alive."

But what it did to her body was horrifying: two broken knees, four fractures in her left femur and 21 open fractures in her right leg.

She remembers lying on the ground, thought she saw her legs next to her and wondered if that was how it felt like to be dead.

"Just a split second later, from somewhere deep inside of me, I felt a pain which was so intense and so overwhelming. That was how I knew I was alive. Then I blacked out."

When she woke up two days later, doctors told her she would never walk again.

"What I did was not only my job, but also my passion, my way of life and my identity. If you took that away from me, what am I, what would I be?"



Left: Ms Hollekim jumping off the KL Tower during the 2005 Kuala Lumpur International Tower Jump. Below: Ms Hollekim at a rehabilitation session in 2007 after her accident. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF KARINA HOLLEKIM



## Conquering fear



SCAN TO WATCH



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Fast forward 12 years.

More than 20 operations have resulted in a patchwork of scars on her body and a veritable junkyard of metal rods, plates and screws in her limbs. But the 42-year-old blonde and blue-eyed Norwegian looks decidedly athletic, and not only walks but also skis like a daredevil.

The accident has also allowed her to re-imagine her life. Now a performance coach to top athletes and business executives, she is also a sought-after motivational speaker.

"Although I would never wish it on my worst enemy, the accident is probably the best thing that happened to me. It has given me not only a career but also meaning and purpose to my life," says Ms

Hollekim, who was in Singapore recently to speak at the SIM Business Insights: Transformation Series event.

An only child, Ms Hollekim inherited her athletic genes from her computer scientist father and kindergarten teacher mother. Both were expert skiers and rock climbers.

Her father's idea of babysitting her when she was a toddler was to take her rock climbing. He'd put her in a knapsack with two holes cut out at the bottom where her legs could dangle.

"When I said I was scared when we were really high up, he would tell me to look up. I grew up without the sense of fear that many kids might have had," she says, adding

that she started skiing almost as soon as she could walk.

Life took a tragic turn when the family was involved in a car crash when she was four. Her mother suffered a severe brain injury, went into a coma for several months, became paralysed on her right side and lost her memory.

"She has been living in homes and rehabilitation centres ever since," says Ms Hollekim, whose parents' marriage broke up as a result of the accident. The episode, she says, affected her profoundly.

"It showed me that our lives could turn upside down in a split second. I understood even then that while my mother was still here physically, she was gone from our world and was never going to come back."

She became seized by the urgency "to experience everything and live life to the fullest".

To get her father's attention, she threw herself into sports and mountaineering because those were his passions. "I did everything to make him see me," she says, describing their relationship then as testy.

Her biggest fantasy was flying.

"It was about freedom, about being untouched by the things around me and having the liberty to do what I wanted. It was about conquering physical challenges – high mountains, big open spaces – which demanded much of me but gave me a sense of invincibility."

"I knew I was good at pushing my body, testing my limits. It gave me self-esteem and a sense of control," says Ms Hollekim, who excelled in every sport she undertook, including soccer.

She became such a consummate skier that she had equipment and clothing sponsors by the time she was in her teens.

Although she was a free spirit, she still felt she had to follow the norm and "do what was expected of me from the outside world".

So she studied computer programming and even got herself a well-paid job as a database programmer with the Norwegian civil service.

It was a turning point. "I had a nice boyfriend, nice apartment and a nice job, but I would wake up feeling depressed and unhappy. I had become a person I didn't want to be. I felt trapped, like I was living out someone else's dream," she says.

So just three months later, she chucked the job, the apartment and the boyfriend. With whatever savings she had, she headed for France and Germany, the meccas for skiers and other adventure-hungry adrenaline junkies, to become a professional skier.

"I slept on couches in the homes of friends and worked and trained hard. I wasn't out to become the best but to achieve the sense of freedom I craved. I would always jump

higher to see how far I could go."

Her good looks and athletic prowess soon reeled in gigs to star in extreme sports videos that, in turn, got her the attention of commercial sponsors such as energy drink Red Bull and sporting gear company North Face.

When she was about 20, she met Jeb Corliss, an American professional Base jumper, who introduced her to the extreme sport. They did practice jumps from bridges and cliffs in Idaho, and graduated to skyscrapers in New York and buildings in Vegas.

"Base jumping was a choice very different from others I had made in my life, but I needed to do it to make me feel complete and to fill the little void in my heart. Jeb was very straightforward and told me I could lose my life doing this. I was not naive but I preferred to focus on the bright side."

She says her exploits made her feel as though she was in an action movie. Although many of her crazy leaps from buildings and construction sites took months to plan, she executed them without "too much fuss or drama".

"Maybe one or two people would see you and go, 'Hey, what happened, what was that?' Before they had time to react, I'd be gone. Doing jumps are not just about being seen; they are also about feelings you create for yourself."

Not long after, her thrill-seeking journey turned another corner when she met another American extreme athlete J.T. Holmes, who taught her how to Base jump on skis from towering cliffs in alpine mountains.

It was right up her alley; she became the first woman to ski Base. One of her most complicated and spine-tingling jumps was off the Hand Of Fatima – a stunning cliff formation in the Malian desert of West Africa – just before her accident. It was the subject of a documentary Fatima's Hand, which has been screened at many international festivals. Another biographical documentary of her life, 20 Seconds Of Joy, won the Best Film on Mountain Sports and People's Choice awards at the 2007 Banff Mountain Film Festival.

Picking up the pieces after the accident required Herculean effort. She sank into a deep blue funk but her father helped to get her thoughts into the right place.

"He was shocked and angry that the doctors told me I would not walk again. He said nobody could predict the future. He said, 'What we will focus on is today: What is positive and right and what needs to be done today. Thinking about all the questions that you have no answers to will just drain your energy.'"

"I became very strict with myself and what I allowed myself to think," says Ms Hollekim, whose weight dropped from 60kg to 42kg after the ordeal. She endured more than 20 operations, and spent a couple of years going in and out of hospitals and rehabilitation centres.

"I had a rule. It was okay to pause, to take a break and rethink, but I would never stop... I realised that I would never fail if I never stopped."

It took her six months to learn how to put on her socks and almost two years before she started walking. The day she walked out of her hospital room into the corridor with the help of a Zimmer frame, a nurse dropped the tray of pills she was holding, started weeping and ran to give her a hug.

In January 2010, more than three years after her accident, she put on her skis again at a ski resort in Hemsedal. "It was such an important thing for me. If I couldn't do it, I would have to remobilise myself to regain strength to move forward."

To her relief, she did it.

The two runs she did that day tired her out for the next few days but today, she can ski effortlessly for as long as she wants.

A couple of years ago, she did the haute, or high-level, route, which involves six days of traversing the mountains and glaciers between Chamonix in France and Zermatt in Switzerland. "I've been working really hard so that I can make my own choices without my body deciding what I'm capable of doing."

Ms Hollekim gave her first talk in a wheelchair about two years after her accident, to 1,500 people at the Oslo Concert Hall.

"After that, a lot of people came over to hug me and say I inspired them. It made me realise my story could be larger than me and be used to help others to be better versions of themselves," says Ms Hollekim, who has two sons, aged three and five, with her partner Benjamin Jensen, a former deathlete who now works as a performance coach at the Norwegian Olympic Sports Centre.

Her accident has given her a "perspective I don't want to be without". "It may be a cliché but adversity makes us better people. We need that to remind ourselves what a good life we have and to appreciate people and good moments every day."

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