

WRITER'S CORNER:

You're Never Too Old to SKYDIVE

By Lois Hicks

Five skydivers and I loaded into the gutted Cessna 206. Radim, my tandem dive instructor, crawled in first and sat in the tail of the plane. I crawled in after and sat on the floor with my back against Radim. A videographer named Brent entered with a huge camera attached to his helmet, making him look like a giant insect. He sat down facing me, squeezed behind the pilot. Three members of an elite Carolina Skydiving exhibition team crawled in and filled the right side of the Cessna.

I am the only first time diver in a plane of experts!

"Are you nervous?" someone shouts over the roar of the plane's engine. Heads swivel and watch my response.

"Yes, but determined," I yell back. "I won't back out." But just in case my body freezes at the open door, I add, "But if I do, push me out!"

One of the skydivers points to his wrist altimeter and announces, "We are at twenty-five hundred feet." Adrenalin pours into my already flooded system and my heart rhythm accelerates. He continues, "Eight thousand more to go." We will be going up two miles before we jump.

At five thousand feet I look out the windows and marvel that we are up so high. Then the fact that I am going to jump out of a plane almost two miles above the earth hits me. *What am I doing?*

At seventy-five hundred feet Radim tells me to sit up on my knees and to hold to the harness' front loops while he buckles my four-point harness to his, reminding me that each fastener can hold 550 pounds. We sit back on the floor while he reviews the instructions and I concentrate on each maneuver practiced during ground instruction.

"In a minute the door will open. When I tell you, move to the front of the plane. Do exactly what I tell you when I tell you."

The door slides open and the rushing air roars. One by one the three skydivers and the videographer disappear through the door. Now it's just Radim and me. He gives a signal and I duck waddle to the front, hands gripping the harness in front of my chest. We squat beside the open door and he nudges my shoulders. I turn slightly and see the sky and clouds with earth below and the videographer hanging by his hands onto the wing, his camera pointing my way. Behind me and closer to the wing, Radim stretches out his right leg and places his foot on a pad attached to the wing strut.

"Put your right foot in front of mine," he yells.

I tighten my hand grips and stretch my foot out and back to reach the pad, but the wind force blows my foot off. I place my foot a second time, but again I am unable to hold it against the wind. On the third try, Radim places his foot and weight on my mine and our feet hold.

Radim reaches around and tilts my forehead back. He rocks my shoulders forward and back once ... twice. On the third push, I fall from the plane into



Lois Hicks soars.
Photo by Brent Sheets

a half somersault, head toward earth, feet to heaven. In fast time, Radim taps my shoulder, the signal to get into free fall position. Now, with our arms spread in a wing position, backs slightly arched, chins up and feet

spread apart, our descent slows perceptibility and the glorious moment of controlled free fall occurs.

Too soon Radim pulls the rip cord and we jerk like stringed puppets before starting a slow chute fall. Radim works the chute in a swinging slant while I stare in awe at firmament, mountains, and earth. He turns the chute and points to Stone Mountain, a North Carolina landmark of pale granite in green and blue mountains.

We approach the drop zone target and Radim commands, "Get read to lift your legs. Hold them tight!" There is urgency and warning in his voice and I remember his ground instruction: "Get your legs up and keep them up. Our lives depend on it!"

"Now!" he commands. I grab behind my right knee with my right arm and pull up and hold while I grab my left knee with my left arm. Radim lifts his legs under mine. We skim above the ground in a seated position, then touch down in a long, smooth glide on our bottoms.

I see my husband, daughter-in-law and grandchildren jumping up and down and cheering and I smile as I think, "I hope they remember to follow their dreams like their 73-year-old granny did today!"

Lois Hicks is a graduate of Salem college, a writer, retired teacher and librarian, who celebrates life with her husband of 55 years and their family, including various 19 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



View of earth from Lois Hicks' vantage point.
Photo by Brent Sheets