

EVERYONE CAN Fly

BY SHARON ROMELCZYK

Freedom.” When asked to describe the experience of paragliding in one word, Chris Santacroce chose “Freedom.” Mr. Santacroce is the founder of Project Airtime (www.projectairtime.org), a nonprofit organization located in Utah that provides adapted tandem paragliding rides to kids and adults with a range of special needs, free of charge. Chris and his team have provided hundreds of individuals with the opportunity to lift high in the sky and feel freedom from any mobility, balance, or other issues they may face on the ground.

Chris began providing free paragliding rides about 15 years ago, beginning with friends and their children, some of whom had special needs. In 2013, he formed the nonprofit organization, Project Airtime, which runs purely on donations and volunteers so that everyone who wants to paraglide is able to. Everyone – that’s a key part of the mission. Chris believes that everyone deserves the opportunity to paraglide and is committed to making that possible for those who are interested. The organization has even been able to offer scholarships to a few people per year, to offset the travel costs to come to Utah and participate in the therapeutic flying experience.

The “therapeutic flying experience” can last anywhere from a couple of minutes to a half an hour, depending on how long the person wants. Project Airtime has worked with kids with special

needs, people with brain and spinal cord injuries, chronic illness, elderly individuals, and individuals through the Make A Wish® and Wounded Warriors® programs. They have found that individuals feel empowered, rejuvenated, and even inspired by the experience.

“As far as physical activities go, there are very few that a person with a wheelchair can be on par with everyone else, and this is one of them. When they’re in the sky, everyone is on the same level,” Chris said. Paragliding is different from other sports in that it is not about strength. Individuals are taught to command the aircraft and feel light and in control in the sky.

Chris Santacroce is a career paraglider who was even a Red Bull athlete for some time. One particular experience led him to create Project Airtime and offer this experience to others. As a passionate, thrill-seeking athlete, Chris spent a lot of time doing stunts. Santacroce was known for a trick called the “Death Spiral.” The pilot circles low and drags the wingtip on the ground before straightening up for a normal landing. One fateful day, Santacroce let the wing tip drag in a wheat field and the subsequent rough landing caused him a spinal cord injury. He wondered if he’d ever be able to walk again. Chris was lucky to make a 100 percent recovery, but the experience has forever changed his life and has helped him define his life’s work. Instead of focusing on doing

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FREE AS A BIRD: Paragliding is different from other sports in that it is not about strength. Individuals are taught to command the aircraft and feel light and in control in the sky.

stunts, he now focuses his time on empowering others to be able to do things they dream of doing. Chris also owns SuperFly, Inc. a paragliding school in Salt Lake City, Utah. Chris has been working on various techniques and equipment designs for years to enable safe flight for people with disabilities and other special needs.

Project Airtime does not advertise their services, but they do work with a few local organizations to spread the word. They are available to fly every single day of the year, and Chris says, "I even live right on the takeoff spot!" They use a special adaptive chair to make it a comfortable experience for everyone. In the past year, they have provided services to 40 individuals and about 30 of

their family members. They have done training events in Seattle and other cities to help train more paragliders and are planning similar events in the future. As a long-term goal, they hope to be able to offer more scholarships to individuals. While the services are free and open to everyone who is interested, distance and transportation is a factor for many. Last year they provided a scholarship to someone to travel across the country with their family and have this experience. This year, Project Airtime provided a scholarship to a man who is a paraplegic to learn to paraglide by himself.

Chris hopes to raise awareness about the value of adapted sports programs like Project Airtime so that more individuals can participate and make their dreams a reality. •



ANTON FLIES!: Anton showed up rockin' his Super Man sweatshirt, fully stoked to fly. www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq7_dU64_7w

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For more information on Project Airtime, visit ProjectAirtime.org

Check out Project Airtime on
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