

Philippe Petit stunned the world and transformed the way the World Trade Center was viewed by the masses: from a public nuisance to a popular New York attraction.

Another adventurer, George Willig, took the world by surprise as well, providing a welcome reprieve to the financial worries plaguing New York residents at the time.

The Twin Towers Tightrope Walker

Aryeh Cohen

In April, 2006, a plucky individual climbed the exterior walls of the Empire State Building and prepared himself to BASE jump off the observation deck. BASE jumping employs an initially packed parachute to jump from fixed objects such as buildings, antennas, bridge spans and cliffs.

The individual, a Californian named Jeb Corliss, a professional adventurer, had successfully executed similar stunts in the past, jumping from several tall buildings and popular tourist sites. In 2006, as he prepared to do so off the tallest building in New York, security personnel caught up with him, restrained him and hand-cuffed him to the gate of the observatory. He remained dangling for a while in full view of the gawking crowds below until mercifully police officers arrived to arrest him.

Newspaper editorials and media commentators condemned him for endangering his own life and those of others, businessmen were furious at him for paralyzing the bustling business center for hours, while the regular person on the street was just plain irritated and unimpressed by the feat. Ironically, had Corliss succeeded, he would almost certainly have become a hero. Prominent figures would have lauded his bravery, and he quite possibly would have received several medals as well as flattering coverage in the media. His problem was that he had failed.

How can we say that? Because during the 1970s, two adventurers successfully executed similarly daring stunts on the then-tallest buildings in New York, the Twin Towers, and were accorded hero status.

One man was Philippe Petit, who, on August 7, 1974, strung a piece of rope between the towers, 1,350 feet in the air, and made his way across.

The other adventurer, George Willig, followed on May 26, 1977, with a feat of his own, climbing the exterior wall of the South Tower, beginning at street level and continuing on to the very top.

Like Corliss, both of these adventurers were arrested. However, the police department was forced to withdraw the charges against them due to the immense popularity they had achieved. Not only were they not criticized or condemned, but they were effusively praised for their gutsy, skillful and innovative actions, and eventually went on to receive awards for their heroics.

Indeed, history credits Philippe Petit and George Willig with drastically improving the image of the World Trade Center in the public eye, and turning the Towers into one of the most popular attractions in the city.

When construction on the Twin Towers was completed in the 1970s, they were not at all the beloved landmarks mourned by New Yorkers on that tragic day of September 11, 2001. Back then, many New Yorkers were dismayed that the huge project would require the razing of a full 13 streets in downtown Manhattan. Residents regarded the overbearing skyscrapers as exaggerated, monstrous real estate projects that callously usurped thriving neighborhoods populated by thousands of families. At best, they were unappealing prison-like fortresses arbitrarily plopped down into their midst and the Port Authority encountered significant difficulty in finding tenants to occupy the offices.

And then Petit and Willig enraptured the public with their stunts, implanting in New Yorkers enthusiasm and pride about their skyscrapers, the tallest buildings in the world back then.

Moreover, at that time, New York was struggling with a financial crisis not experienced since the era of the Great Depression. The two heroes provided people with a temporary escape from their financial woes, and gave them a reason to be proud of their foundering city and its landmarks.

The Making of a Tightrope Adventurer

Philippe Petit was born in Paris on August 13, 1949. As he was growing up, his parents discerned a marked difference between him and other children of his age. He frequently felt that his peers were concerned with silly and inconsequential things and refused to join their childish play. Instead, he came up with his own games and stunts and mostly immersed himself in his own little world.

He liked to climb up onto anything he could – the higher the better – in an effort to put as much distance as he could between himself and others. At age four, he was already climbing really high objects, and at age six he had mastered various tricks and stunts along with his climbing abilities. A wild and unruly child, he used his talents in negative ways, for instance, learning how to become a professional pickpocket.

When he turned 16, he began attending acrobatic performances in Paris, and often sneaked backstage where the acrobats were training, eagerly absorbing the tricks of their trade. Philippe was not interested in getting even a rudimentary education and used his time in the classroom to plan and execute pranks on his classmates and teachers. By the time he reached the age of 17, he had attended five schools and been expelled from all of them.

The first time Philippe discovered the skill of tightrope walking was when his older brother attended a performance of a famous traveling circus. When the circus group would arrive in a city, they would rent a huge area in the center of town, and then string a rope across the area, fifty feet high. There were times when their audience consisted of only half a dozen people and they then sustained a financial loss. Then there were cities where the crowds came in droves, spilling out of the designated area, and they would rake in the profits. Philippe heard his brother's description of the performance and was completely unimpressed.

"What's the big deal of walking on a



Petit in 2011. Inset: Philippe Petit displays his tightrope-walking prowess by tossing objects around as he walks.

rope?" he remarked with disdain. "I can accomplish that in two minutes flat!"

In order to convince his listeners, he immediately found two pieces of rope and strung them both between two trees, one a little higher than the other. At first he held on to the higher rope as he strode across the lower one in order to maintain his balance. Soon, however, he cut the upper rope and began striding across the lower rope with no help at all aside from the balancing rod he held between his hands. He thus strolled back and forth, again and again, becoming so obsessed with his new skill that he nearly forgot to eat and drink.

Philippe began spending six to seven hours a day on the rope, and with every passing day his tightrope abilities improved. He became so immersed in his practice sessions that he no longer had time for his former pranks and childish antics. All he saw all day was rope, rope, rope.

Philippe considered joining a circus, but was rebuffed whenever he applied for a position, since he was not prepared to take directions from superiors and was only willing to perform his stunts in the manner he wanted. Left with no choice, he began conducting a one man performance on the streets of Paris.

Apparently, Philippe had not completely