

Nik Wallenda—Scion of the Wallenda Dynasty of Daredevils

# The Man Who Walks On Air

*Last year he became the first person in history to walk a tightrope directly over Niagara Falls. A few weeks ago he became the first man to grace a highwire above the dizzying drop of the Grand Canyon. Now he is planning to walk from the Empire State Building to the Chrysler Building, covering nine city blocks high above the busy streets of Manhattan.*

*Nik Wallenda has made himself famous as funambulist par excellence with his tightrope walks over the most frightening spots around the world. He knows that some of his predecessors were killed in the attempt, yet he is convinced that he is destined to die a natural death.*

- Aviva Sternfeld



**D**aredevils may be motivated by fame or money. Some are drawn to the thrill of taking on a dangerous challenge. Nik Wallenda argues that he belongs to none of those categories. He dislikes the term “daredevil” altogether. Wallenda points out that he invests tremendous effort before each performance to ensure that he is not risking his life. He trains continuously and tests all of his equipment faithfully. He also follows the weather reports closely, especially wind conditions, before each walk.

Be that as it may, Wallenda seems to have an insatiable appetite for dangerous stunts. He has performed tightrope walks all around the world. He also performs many other tricks that astound—and panic—his audience.

Nik Wallenda has an iron will, which has landed him places that others are barred from. Last year he became the first person to walk a tightrope over Niagara Falls, even though both the United States and Canada have strict laws against any such stunts being performed there. A few weeks ago he became the first person to walk a tightrope over the Grand Canyon. As soon as he jumped safely to the ground on the other side, Wallenda began planning a walk over the busy streets of Manhattan on a tightrope stretched from the tip of the Empire State Building to the tip of the Chrysler Building.



Nik Wallenda strolls on a Ferris wheel.



Elephants waiting to be transported by train to a Ringling Brothers Circus performance.

Will Wallenda succeed in this latest stunt? Not if Police Commissioner Ray Kelly has anything to do with it. “If he fell into the Grand Canyon... he’d end up dead and wet,” said Kelly’s spokesman. “If he fell in Manhattan, G-d help those below.”

## Flying Wallendas

As much as he insists that the public need not worry about his welfare, Nik Wallenda does not have history on his side. And we’re talking about the history of his own family here.

Wallenda is a member of a family famed for producing generations of daredevils and stuntmen. It courses through his veins. The family history dates back to 1780, when the Wallendas were a circus family that traveled through Europe performing shows in small towns. They were outstanding jugglers, animal trainers, tightrope walkers and hand-standers. If the crowd was pleased with their performance, the family members were well-compensated for their efforts when they passed around a hat at the end of the act.

Karl Wallenda, Nik’s great-grandfather, was born in Magdeburg, Germany. He joined the family’s act at the age of six. He specialized in piling chairs one atop the other and climbing to the top, where he then did a headstand. When he saw an ad looking for “an experienced hand-balancer with

courage” in the early 1920s, Karl Wallenda quickly applied for the job.

The job involved performing together with another stuntman named Louis Weitzman. As Weitzman’s assistant, he was to follow Weitzman on a tightrope and do a handstand on Weitzman’s hands in the middle of the tightrope. Working with Weitzman, Karl Wallenda perfected the art of tightrope walking. He went on to share his knowledge with his brother Herman, and the two Wallendas began performing various tricks together while tightrope walking.

To make sure his audience never grew bored, Karl Wallenda continuously added new tricks to his repertoire. In 1922, he performed his tricks sitting on a chair perched atop a pole that lay on the shoulders of two bicyclists who rode over a tightrope 50 feet above the ground. Oh—and Karl balanced his son on his own shoulders.

The act became such a sensation that when John Ringling, of Ringling Brothers fame, witnessed a Wallenda performance in Cuba he immediately invited the Wallendas to join his circus. Karl, Herman and the other members of the Wallenda family moved to America in 1928. They were billed for their first appearance at a Ringling Brothers circus in Madison Square Garden.

Shortly before the show, the Wallendas learned that their safety nets had not arrived. They had been lost with some of their luggage that had been shipped from Europe. After a brief discussion they decided not to let such a minor problem ruin their opening appearance. They went ahead with the performance without the safety nets.

The crowd was so stunned by the show—made especially dramatic by the lack of safety nets—that they applauded the act for 15 minutes straight! And since then, the Wallendas have never used safety nets again.

The “Wonderful Wallendas,” as they were then known, performed with the Ringling Brothers circus throughout the 1930s and 1940s. On one occasion, during a show in Akron, Ohio, the tightrope slipped from its



Karl Wallenda, patriarch of the Flying Wallendas, at work above London.



One of the Flying Wallendas tossing flaming torches.



Karl Wallenda balances on a chair supported by bicyclists on a tightrope 50 feet in the air.



Karl Wallenda tops a three-man pyramid.