

Cragsmoor Historical Journal

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GLIDING NIRVANA

This year marks the 50th anniversary of hang gliding on the Shawangunk Ridge. In this issue, we will explore its early history through the experiences of some of the first pilots to “Fly the Gunks.”

Until 1972, the skies over the Shawangunk Ridge between Cragsmoor and Ellenville were the domain of eagles, ravens, falcons and hawks. That year, they were challenged by the intrusion of a young teenager who took a courageous leap off a cliff ledge in a homemade hang glider and joined them in flight. That jump would transform his life, as well as the lives of countless others who would follow in his footsteps. He was 14-year-old John Sylvester, a student from Marlboro, NY, who was strapped into a glider he had built with his physics teacher and sky diver, Dan Chapman. He was preceded by a long line of dreamer-adventurers, including Dedalus, DaVinci, Otto Lilienthal and others who shared his passionate desire to break the barriers separating earth-bound beings from the birds, by using the energy of the wind to support the flight of wingless men and women.



John Sylvester - 1972

Wind Energy

John Stanger was one of those fortunate kids who grew up in Cragsmoor and explored every exciting aspect of its wild terrain. When the call came to serve his country in Vietnam, he willingly joined the Navy Seabees for two tours of duty. When he returned in 1968, he felt, if he had survived that war, he could survive anything. He was hardwired for adventure and the opportunity presented itself just a few years later.

In 1974, when he and his close friend, Wayne Leininger, a former helicopter pilot in Viet Nam, rounded a bend on Route 52, they were thrilled by the sight of several people launching from the lookouts in hang gliders. They had heard there was such a sport in California, but never expected to see it on their own cliffs! They quickly befriended them and learned more about it.

While they worked on the roofs in Cragsmoor, they kept their eyes on the sky, the wind direction, and dreamed of flying. The following year, Wayne took lessons with Bob Dornick at Holiday Mountain and John joined him for one. They struck a deal with Bob to pick up an order of five Sea Gull 3 hang gliders waiting at JFK airport. In exchange, they split the cost of one to share.

They practiced on the ski hill at Mt. Cathalia, one time even flying down near the Fallsview Hotel. The next step was to take off from the lookout. The first few times, John landed safely but couldn't even remember taking off, it was such a plunge. They had to trust the wind to lift them

when it hit the cliffs, and he was fascinated by its power. Now, when they were working, they could say, “Hmmm, the wind is just right. Let’s take some time off and fly.” They worked as a team, taking turns flying and picking each other up in their trucks. They had their mishaps, but that was part of the adventure. One time, John lost altitude when the wind began to change direction near Route 209. Unable to reach the landing field, he chose to land in a small maple tree. By the time his friends got there, he was out of the tree and had packed up the hang glider. “I’m like a cat with nine lives,” he said.

John and Wayne had survived Viet Nam and now they had wings and were flying off cliffs. They were both free spirits – young, strong, healthy, and literally “high” on life. But it wasn’t long before a dark shadow fell across their skies. In 1977/78, a severe swelling developed on Wayne’s chest. John sent him, immediately, to the VA hospital, where he was diagnosed with lymphoblastic lymphoma, a cancer of the blood associated with exposure to radiation or pesticides. After several weeks of treatment, he was sent back to Cragsmoor, but he continued to decline. Within six months, Wayne succumbed to this devastating disease – a tragic loss to the entire community.

By 1979, John had established his own successful business as an iron worker. He was so busy, he no longer had time to fly, but because of those earlier experiences, he began to think more about wind, its power and how that energy could be harnessed. He did some work in the fledgling wind power industry. When it came time to build his own home, he chose a site on the highest, northwest corner of the hamlet. He opened it up to expansive views, crisscrossed by hang gliders flying on the powerful force of the wind; the same wind that still lifts his spirits and nourishes his own high energy.

Arial Techniques

A.T. was the first glider shop and flight school to open on RT. 209 in 1973. Jim Aronson was partners in it with Duka Kaknas and John Gavriel from Zephyr Glider manufactures in Vermont, who attended the first World Championships in Austria in 1975. Stan Leininger was also involved. Unfortunately, Duka

died in a small airplane crash, leaving his wife, Mary, to take his place. She married T. J. Young, another outstanding hang glider pilot. Dave Chapman was part of the staff, Paul Voight ran the training school and was joined by fellow instructor and flying partner Tom Aguero in 1981. With support from the Ellenville Chamber of commerce, it sponsored the Northeast Hang-Gliding Championship in 1978. By 1980, they were ready to host the ten-day US National Championships, which drew more than a thousand spectators. They published a thirty-page program that featured an article by Dan Chapman on how hang gliders work and one by Susan Wiand of Walker Valley about women’s involvement in the sport.



Paul Voight, Tommy Aguero, 1976, Moth II

Life Lessons

In 1972, on the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, N.C., famous in the annals of flight, eleventh-grader Paul Voight witnessed hang gliding for the first time. He was so enthralled that his parents bought him a lesson, little knowing that this experience would be a “lesson” that determined the future of his whole life.

In her column as editor of a Westchester newspaper, Peggy Voight wrote that she should have suspected how serious her son's fascination was with hang gliding, when his science projects all began to involve aerodynamics and model glider-building. His interest in the subject, in fact, was much more than as a recreational sport. He knew the history of its development, as well as current innovations in its technology. It wasn’t long before it became clear that he was directing all his intelligence, energy, knowledge and

creativity into learning everything that was known at that time about this form of free flight, with the hope of sharing it with others on a professional level.

Paul started flying in 1972, and by 1981 he had been flying for nine years and teaching for two, having achieved acclaim as one of the nation's ranked pilots after finishing in the top ten in that year's National Championships. He was also a USHGA Certified instructor and had been flying and instructing for more than 5 years. His many students were the fortunate recipients of his wide experience and his inquiry into the mechanics of flight.

One of them was Bob Fagan, a rookie reporter for the Ellenville Journal, who realized that learning how to hang glide would make a good story, which he entitled "Flying into the Realm of Eagles." He found himself with half a dozen other aspirants with Paul as their teacher. Along with individual attention, they learned the principals behind safe and successful flying: how to beat gravity, and "how to transform that deadly downward force into a forward motion." Under Paul's guidance, Bob did succeed and lived to tell the tale of how he overcame his fear and experienced the euphoria and freedom of flight.

Paul ran the flight school at Arial Techniques until 1984, when he opened his own successful shop and school, Fly High Hang Gliding, in Pine Bush. From there he continued to teach and inspire those who sought freedom in the skies, including his son Ryan, whom he introduced to flying tandem over the

Ridge at the age of four and solo at the age of ten. Now 37, Ryan has started to train the next generation by flying tandem with his daughter, Scarlett, at age four, and continuing to encourage the family passion for flight. Paul's life's work and his dedication to the sport goes beyond the Shawangunks to also serving as Regional Director of the United States Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association.

Genetics

Born in Kerhonkson and raised in Ellenville, Greg Black had flying in his blood and the Ridge in his sights. His father was a pilot and bought a 1948 single-engine Luscombe, which he flew out of

Anderson Acres air strip in Accord and performed aerobatics in regional air shows. Greg learned about flying in it, and years after his father had sold it, he tracked it down, restored it and brought it back to life.

Greg had been inspired by the sight of early pilots hang gliding on the Ridge. When he was 15, he went to New Jersey with a friend to take a lesson. The experience was so powerful, it determined the direction of his life. He bought an all-white hang glider with a five-foot marijuana leaf painted on it and trained on hills in Kerhonkson. His first flight was in 1974, when Duka Kaknas and Jim Aronson took him "under their wings." After high school, he joined his brother in California and found a job working for a hang glider manufacturer where he designed, built and flew his own hang glider. He was surprised to find that his brother, Charlie, had also taken up the sport. He had never flown with his father as Greg had, but they both became serious hang-gliding pilots, and his brother went on to become an accomplished airplane pilot. Flying was in their genes.



Greg Black, 1985

By the time he returned to Ellenville, the hang-gliding scene had literally "taken off," and Greg wanted to be a part of it. In 1980, he opened Mountain Wings, a pro shop and training school in Kerhonkson. After three years, he moved it to Canal Street in Ellenville for another twenty years, and it is now on Hang Glider Road just below the Ridge, facing the training fields. He earned his master rating in 1985.

At first, pilots landed in a field with permission from the owner, and then Greg and Tony Covelli

bought that land together and increased it to secure its use for the sport. Tony owns land on the right of Hang Glider Road and Greg, the field on the left with the training hill. They each also acquired land for launching above Route 52. Neighboring farmer Joe Novell was often on the scene to lend a helping hand. A launch ramp had been constructed on Route 52, but one day the town supervisor sent a crew up to take it out. Black reported it and eventually the State DOT agreed to replace it using his plans. The State realized that hang gliding helped to attract tourists to the area, and it wanted to maintain that interest. Now, with a focus on safe flying practices, Mountain Wings is recognized as one of the safest hang-gliding centers on the East Coast.

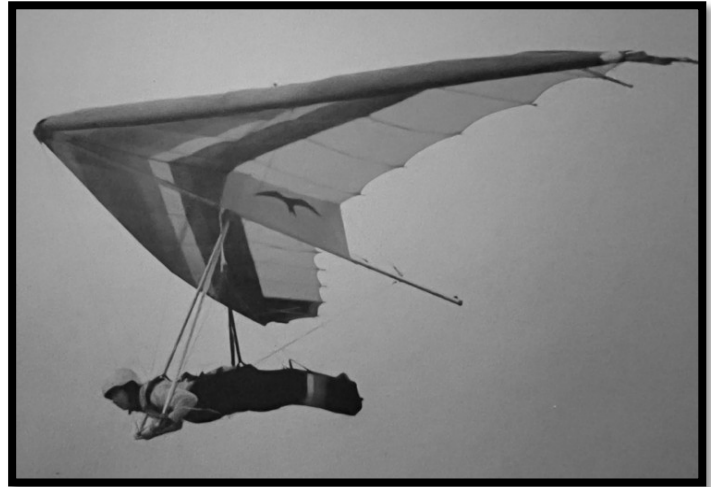
Learning to Fly

It was January 1, 1981, and 19-year-old Jim Donovan was psyched about his first hang gliding lesson with Paul Voight at Arial Techniques. It was so cold that when he tried to close the car door, the latch froze, and he had to hold it shut as he drove.

Along the way he stopped to call Paul. "I'm running late. Please don't leave for the training hill without me. I'm coming, I'm coming!" "Are you out of your mind?" Paul responded. "You're the only one coming, along with some Alaskan pipeline workers." As it turned out, they were also Klondike bear hunters, just wearing flannels under their vests as if they were out for a spring walk, said Jim, "while I was in a total flight suit with every inch of skin covered."

"We had some ground schooling with Paul. Then the next time I start running down the training hill, a glider that weighed 60 or 80 pounds is now weightless, and before you know it, it's got you like an adult would grab a kid by the scruff of his jacket, and the glider is picking you up, and all at once your feet are tickling the snow. That was the moment when I was like 'holy sh--! This is amazing' and I was hooked. When that glider's got you by the scruff and you're under its power – that's the transformational moment!"

"My first solo mountain flight (1,050') was my next big leap. I'm sitting at the top of this mountain with flight instructor Tom Aguero, who was there to help me launch. It's 7 AM, but the wind is blowing in the wrong direction, and Tom had to go

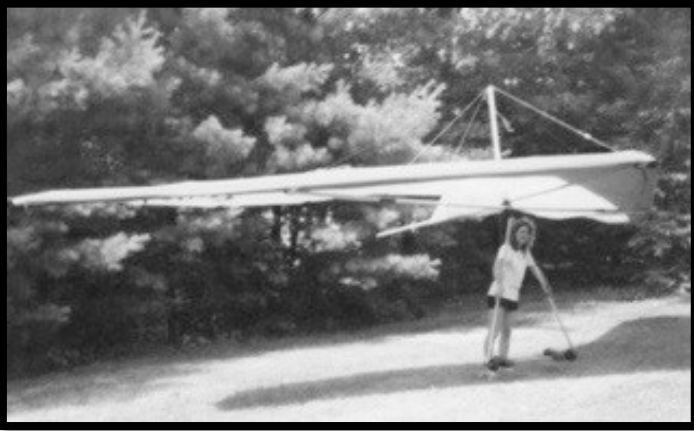


Jim Donovan - In Flight

to work at 8 AM. He explained that this happened a lot. 'Jim, it's not good right now. I have to go. If it gets better just fly. I'll be down there.' So, after a while, the wind starts coming in. I'm thinking, holy cow, this is doable. I'm alone, but if I don't do this now, I'll never do it and I'll never look at myself the same again. So, I picked up this glider and I ran, and the thing grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and off we went. I was terrified, super terrified! But I hung there like a sack of potatoes and remembered that they told us, 'These things fly themselves.' So, I used a feather-like touch on the base bar, just pulling it ever so lightly toward my waist and I felt the glider start to move faster. Then I pushed it out and it slowed down a little bit. I moved not an inch to the left and the glider went left. I moved it to the right, and the glider started going right. I was like, holy sh—this works!"

"When you take off, at first, you're only a few feet off the ground, and then within 30 or 40 seconds you could be 1000 feet off the ground. At some point you say, 'What you do now decides whether you live or die.' I remembered to fly towards Kelly's barn, make a right, then figure out the angle to get into the landing area. I had never done a turn before, so basically, I taught myself how to fly on that flight. I made some turns as I got closer and pulled in at a decent angle and landed. When I touched down there was such an adrenaline rush and elation that I shouted at the top of my lungs, throwing one arm up in the air yelling YEAH! Tommy was watching from the training field and had seen me fly. I just packed that thing up and went right back and did it again.

That experience made me much more confident to meet life's future challenges."



Jane Lenard – My First Glider, 1985

Living the Dream

Starting from before she was in kindergarten, Jane Lenard dreamed every night that she could fly. Even when she was awake, flying was an obsession. "I would spread out my arms and cruise down the street imagining I was flying over the treetops, looking down at all the people. It was so cool!" Flying is what she dreamed about, and she wanted it to be real, but was deeply disappointed when she woke and realized it wasn't. The dreams continued for years, and she never forgot that feeling that, eventually, made hang gliding so significant for her. "It is literally living a dream come true, and it is the most amazing, peaceful feeling."

She first discovered hang gliding in an article in Scholastic Magazine about a 12-year old boy flying one, and she realized this was a possibility. When she was 14 years old, her father handed her an article in the Poughkeepsie Journal about the Nationals in Ellenville, and she knew immediately where she had to go to fulfill her dream. At eighteen in 1984, she had a summer job, her own car and she showed up at Mountain Wings all by herself. Paul Voight was her teacher. "He's incredibly intuitive, a born flier, very in tune, patient and caring. His calming presence gives his students confidence, and he makes it look so easy." When he started his own shop, Fly High Hang Gliding, she continued her training there.

Surprisingly, Jane did have a fear of heights. One incident occurred at another location with a launch site from a cliff 400 feet straight down.

Spectators were sitting on the edge, dangling their legs over the side. They invited her to take a look and she tried crawling on her belly and poking her head over, but she was too frightened. Instead, she stepped back, hooked into her glider, and flew off the cliff. There she was safe, strapped to her wings that would take her, fearlessly, wherever she wanted to go.

Teamwork

It must have been intuition that led Kristin Fitzpatrick to her first hang gliding lesson in 1987, after observing it for the first time at an event near Hunter Mountain. She was fascinated and knew this was something she had to do. Fortunately, she met Paul Voight there, and a few weeks later she was in Ellenville, learning it "from the ground up."

A cross country competition was in progress when she arrived. When she offered to help, she met wonderful people working together as a community. "It's a different type of person who is involved in this sport, and they're very supportive and accepting of each other." She started training with Paul Voight and Tommy Aguero. After one of her training sessions, she met her future husband, Rick Fitzpatrick, an experienced flyer, who took over her training under Paul's direction.

They shared many exciting experiences. Rick did long distance flying, while Kristin observed the wind direction and tried to follow him by car with a road map. He would catch thermals and fly from one to another at five- to six-thousand feet, once flying 90 miles into Connecticut. They each carried ham radios and when Rick landed, he



Kristin Fitzpatrick = Flying, 1985

called the hang-gliding shop to give his location. Kristin would also call in to find out where he was and drive there to pick him up. One time, she was the one in the air, flying towards Wurtsboro, when a severe thunderstorm came through the valley. Rick was back on the ground in Ellenville, and with the radio, was able to guide her into a safe landing on the golf course at the Homowack Lodge.

Kristin and Rick married and started a family, which presented new challenges. In the beginning, the burden really falls on the woman and she stopped flying when the children were very little. Unlike other women who don't return to flying, as her own children grew, the whole family was able to return to the site. The parents took turns flying and their sons developed their own interest in the sport. One of them learned to fly while he was away at college.

What really keeps Kristin flying now is the peaceful, freeing, calm feeling she experiences whenever she is in the air and the diverse group of people who pursue this sport from all walks of life. "In this community, it doesn't matter. We all share the same passion."

Career Change

In 1988, Kevin Goodspeed sent out a corporate email inviting eleven of his colleagues at IBM in East Fishkill to join him in a day-long introductory hang-gliding lesson on the Ridge. All eleven responded with a resounding "YES," and all survived. It was only Kevin, however, whose life was transformed by it, and who returned for more. It was after buying a new "Christmastime" glider, completing a full series of lessons, and experiencing the freedom of flight, that the thought of spending the rest of his life working in a corporate setting had become far too restrictive." Soon, he left the stability of a good job and moved to Spring Glen, setting up a woodworking shop in a building shared with flying-site landowner Tony Covelli. This freed up his time and put him close to the hang-gliding scene in Ellenville.

This lifestyle-change also allowed Kevin to work on his own schedule and to develop his creative talents as a master craftsman restoring historic homes in Cragsmoor. Eventually, he would purchase and move into his own fixer-upper, while at the same time leaving his mark on homes in the historic district and creating both whimsical and imposing objects out of wood. Many of his flights took him over the hamlet, gliding on northwest winds of 10-15 mph. Some of his favorite flights have been when he can holler down greetings to his outdoor neighbors such as "What's for dinner?" and, on occasion, terrific dinners would indeed be waiting for him.

Liberty to Fly

Roger Baker achieved national acclaim with a hang-gliding field project in 2000 that went viral, but his story really began in the 70's, "...the age of refitted mini vans and homemade gliders, designed by a generation seeking freedom from all constraints, including gravity."

He started flying in 1974 at an excavation pit near Sayreville, NJ. He loved it so much, he used his experience as an airbrush painter on planes, hot rods and vans, to land a job in Vermont with a company that converted vans during the "van craze" of the 70's. He bought his first glider there,



Lady Liberty, 2000

and after work he and his friends practiced flying in the White River Valley near Bethel.

Then Roger heard about a place where people did “real” hang gliding in Ellenville, NY. He drove there in 1975 with his new glider and he hasn’t left since, having also found an understanding wife and a home in Cragsmoor. He was impressed by the opportunities to do some real flying at higher elevations that only the Gunks could offer, but he was surprised to see people taking off without a ramp on just a few boards. They needed a launch that was closer to where they would land, so he joined the effort to build one. It was the beginning of a life-long involvement in the hang-gliding community.

“The sport really took off in 1975-76, when a lot of people were building their own gliders, flying, converging, and holding competitions. Everyone thought we were a bunch of crazies who jumped off mountains, but it wasn’t that,” Baker said. “We were seeking the freedom of flying and a lifestyle that allowed us to do it.” They flew without instruments... “from the seat of our pants,” pushing out and pulling in on the bars of the glider. When gliders became more efficient, they started going up in thermals where they could

make a 360 degree turn and gain ten to fifteen feet. “We were literally flying with the birds and learning a lot from them. We were on their turf, and they granted us the freedom to fly there with them.”

That liberty inspired Baker to undertake a massive art project to mark the opening of a new century in 2000. It allowed him to integrate his lifestyle as a hang glider pilot with his career as an innovative artist. After several decades of flying over the verdant green of the landing field and being pulled by gravity into its welcoming safety after many long flights, in 2000 he began to envision it as a large canvas that could be sculpted into an image. With the help of hang-gliding club members who used the club tractor and their own mowers, and inspiration from Tony Covelli, owner of the field and immigrant from Italy, Baker chose the iconic image of The Statue of Liberty. She was noble and strong, welcoming, and comforting, a beacon of light and safety to all who observed her from above. She was an inspiring symbol for the opening of a new century in which hang gliding would continue to improve and grow in popularity.

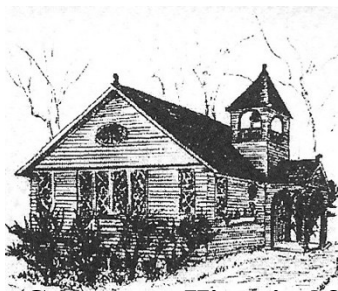
Maureen Radl

With much gratitude to all the pilots who agreed to be interviewed, to Ed Williams whose curiosity prompted this inquiry, to Ken Foldvery who got me started, and to Paul Voight who provided extensive material and guidance on this project.

On the 50th anniversary of hang gliding on the Ridge, the CHS has opened a new file in our archives. It includes personal interviews, news clippings, photos, videos, etc., generously donated by the hang-gliding community. We welcome any material on this subject that you might be willing to share. Check it out at the hang gliding video posted on our website at cragsmoorhistoricalsociety.org



It is with sincere regret that the Society acknowledges the passing of Robi Josephson on June 2, 2022. She was a writer and historian with a sharp eye for details and a special interest in the Shawangunk region. Since 2014, she has generously volunteered her time and skills to editing the final drafts of this Journal. Her keen interest and lively spirit will be greatly missed.



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Summer, 2022

Cragsmoor Historical Society

CHS CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Saturday, July 23th, 12:00- 3:00 - Golf Course Games & BBQ at CHS

Saturday, August 13th, 4:30 pm- 6:30 – Art on the Mountain at CHS &

Sunday, August 14th, 12 -2 pm – Art on the Mountain at CHS

Saturday, September 17th, 9:30 – 12:00 – Mum Sale at the Post Office
to benefit CHS & CFL

October 29- 31st – Festival of Jack O' Lanterns Hayride and pumpkin lighting