

The Tribe
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Norge Roi cranes his neck to take in the spreading flurry of canopies overhead. It's early Friday evening at Skydive Chicago—mid-September—and the sudden mosaic of colorful fabric against the fading sunlight signals the last load of the day.

We're standing in front of Norge's trailer, one of many campers, RV's, mobile homes—even artfully painted school busses—lining the winding gravel road of the Cougar Campground at Skydive Chicago. It's that melancholy month in the Midwest: the time of the season when sweat drenched skydivers trickle from the hangar in hoodies instead of tank tops, last calls come earlier, and the first chill of fall air hints at the season's nearing conclusion.

For months, jumpers from all over the world have flocked here for what could be best compared to a real-life Neverland, a place to cap off afternoons in the sky with nights lit by bonfire. Because while the sprawling acreage of Rook Nelson's Skydive Chicago lures jumpers from their day jobs with its resort-like amenities, business hours are merely precursors to congregational gatherings in which bottles are raised, food is shared, and stories are exchanged between people who, united by the common bond of the sport, develop an even deeper kinship.

It's a connection that, in theory, transcends the obligatory regard for biological tie. Instead, its ancestry roots itself in the personal journey every licensed jumper embarks on beginning with their first solo dive: one in which perceptible limitations are challenged, the courageous self is cultivated, and inner transformation is witnessed, coached, and celebrated by total strangers who quickly become closer than blood.

"It's like a tribe," Norge suggests, his eyes to the descending confetti of parachutes. Norge is a retired skydiver—or, an "old-timer"—as the affectionate lingo goes. He was here when Rook's father, Roger, first drafted his sketches of what is now Skydive Chicago—not on rolled bond paper as one might expect, but in light ballpoint on the back of a diner placemat. Even some twenty years ago, when his community was meager in comparison to the magnitude it assumes today, Norge says, everyone played a vital role in its survival.

"Whether you're a warrior or an elder like me, everyone has a home here. Everyone matters."

Indeed, the "sky family" is presumably a ubiquitous term of endearment among jumpers, and whether linked in formation 13,000 feet up or by a circle of lawn chairs at the Tiki bar, everyone finds a place to dock. There are instructors, the organizers, the packers and riggers, the AFP student fresh off his second solo. There is the veteran jumper who loves to regale even half-listening audiences with frightening tales of antiquated gear gone awry. There are the shredders, the self-proclaimed sky gods, the newbies and the elite competitors, but more important still is the duality of making who people are in the air just as significant as the role they play on the ground.

Lisa, for example, has your drink poured at the Skylounge before you even sit down to order one. Allen at Eat Up! crafts a recipe of biscuits and gravy with the power to stir even the heaviest of sleepers on Sunday morning in the hopes of snagging a plate. Russ spends his winters painting the fleet of planes mechanics like Donovan maintain and pilots like Woody fly all year, and people like Dan, Skydive Chicago's Grounds Manager, will just as soon pause his endless list of maintenance tasks to both free your car from the mud or share his latest rap. So whether it's Anthony, tandem instructor and safety corralling the latest cluster of wide-eyed tandem students to class or Rachel, leading a manifest team by day and her onesie-clad bicycle gang by night, it's the undeniably infectious spirit of camaraderie that inspires A.J., the man behind one of the most anticipated boogies every year, to interrupt his *Summerfest* planning to make sure the visiting load organizer has fresh linens and a hot plate in their camper. Because to him, like so many at Skydive Chicago and dropzones everywhere, it's not about the job, it's about the people. When you sit down at the SDC Core campsite for a plate of Jake's grilled chicken, it's not about your jump numbers, it's about your life. And while this Neverland's Peter Pan would sooner blur past you in a jumpsuit than green tights, the tradition of safety, sportsmanship, and camaraderie Rook Nelson prioritizes season after season is the same belief that unites dropzones everywhere: skydiving isn't just about the sport, it's about the tribe.

We all find our sky family for a plethora of reasons. Maybe it's because we finally mustered the courage to book the tandem we'd received as a birthday gift. Maybe we felt compelled to celebrate a personal milestone in a thrilling and laudable manner. Or, perhaps, throwing ourselves from a plane posed the possibility of better processing an emotional trauma or reconciling a void. Regardless, the alluring freedom of flight once charmed us enough to consider making our first jumps and, whether in the name of grit or grief, we drove ourselves to the dropzone for what would turn out to be — unbeknownst to us — the first of many times.

So it is here, tucked away in the rolling patchwork of farmlands, ribboning through the dusty peaks of rock-studded desserts, and nestled along the waterfronts of beach towns, the many chapters of Neverland call to the world's lost children. Here, the dreamers gather, the drifters pause, and the misfit toys settle into the reassuring company of a community with an unbridled enthusiasm for the air, the sport, and the simple joy of being alive.