



Being Nik Wallenda

Nik Wallenda is one of the most unique people I've ever met. His actual personality doesn't match his persona. He's increasingly become a household name with his incredible stunts—crossing Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, Chicago skyscrapers—blindfolded, the Orlando Eye. The list goes on. But he's still just "Nik."

We recently had lunch. It wasn't the two of us in a corner booth solving the world's problems. I am President of a civic group and had asked Nik to be our guest speaker for our monthly luncheons. (Full disclosure: I work for a local TV station and have interviewed him several times for stories, so I already had a connection to him. It wasn't a cold call.)

The reason Nik agreed to speak to our relatively small group of aging broadcasters begins to tell you a little about the person. He was performing for Circus Sarasota and thought it would be a good way to cross-promote the cause. Keep in mind—Nik going from a worldwide stage to a stage in Sarasota is a bit like a Governor running for city commission. He doesn't need it—but it's his passion.

The Wallendas have a long history in the circus. Nik grew up in Sarasota and is heavily involved in the community.

Despite the fact I had interviewed him a few times, I really didn't know him personally until we sat down for lunch that day. I had just returned from making introductory remarks at the podium and was settling in for lunch when I mentioned in passing that I hoped I hadn't mispronounced a certain person's name I just mentioned at the mic.

"It's already out there, let it go," Nik said.

I looked over at him, not expecting a response, much less one that Zen-like.

"What do you mean?" I asked, thinking I already knew the answer but wanting to hear him explain.

"You did it, whether it's right or wrong—it doesn't matter. You can't take it back. Move on (in your mind)," he responded. "Negative thoughts are like weeds in your head. You have to replace them with positive ones."

I suddenly got the impression this was going to be an interesting lunch before I'd lose him in 20 minutes to the podium.

During the early course of our conversation, he mentioned he recently met Tom Brokaw. I asked him if he ever gets nervous meeting people like that. He gave me a dismissive look. "No. We're all just people." Then I realized it was silly to ask him about getting nervous in light of what he does for a living.

I asked him how he crosses wires. He said, "I go into a zone. Everything slows down." He said he's been doing it since "before he was born," as his mother crossed wires while she was pregnant with him. I asked him if he's calm around the house with his wife and three children. He laughed and said, "No, I still have a bit of a temper." (He and his wife recently renewed their vows at the Ringling Museum C'a D'Zan." Why? "When we got married 15 years ago, we didn't have any money and I promised her one day we'd do it again when we could afford it.) He's a devout Christian and family man. He spends all his free time with his wife and children.

I challenged him to a game of word association regarding his recent stunts:

Niagara Falls: Surreal. Windy and misty. Treacherous. Bureaucracy. The tether ABC made him wear caused it to be more dangerous. "I'd never worn one before and it got in the way," he said.

Grand Canyon: Windy and dusty. Winds of 52 miles per hour forced him to "ride the cable." The hardest walk so far with a steep incline. All the dust lead him to lasik surgery (21 million viewers on Discovery, and millions more in 213 countries).

Chicago: Cold and windy. 36 degrees. Wind: 30 mph. He admits he was in a hurry to get the first walk done, as he was nervous about second one when he was blindfolded. (He said the blindfold idea came about after he had eye troubles following Grand Canyon, and he got to wondering if he could still cross wires if he ever lost his vision.)

"My stunts are no longer about proving anything, but rather inspiring others," he remarked quietly. He has a future as a motivational speaker.

We've stayed in touch since that lunch. I'll text him after national interviews with some professional feedback and he'll usually respond within minutes. He loves getting constructive criticism, always trying to improve whatever he does. Recently his grandmother passed away, the one who he says taught him to "never give up" in light of her horrific upbringing in Nazi Germany. While covering her "Celebration of Life" I was in a crowded smokey room full of former circus performers at a facility on Lockwood Ridge Road. Many of them were in their twilight years. There in the middle of them all, was a thirtysomething reddish-haired figure who looked very familiar. He was just one of the group.

Nik has made himself a celebrity with his high-wire stunts, but in real life he couldn't be more grounded. RAY COLLINS

