

## ***From the Director's Desk***

# **Skydiving and Public Health 3.0**

*by Dr. Sarah Moyer*



A few weekends ago I helped my husband scratch an item off his bucket list by taking him on a surprise skydiving trip for his birthday. People thought it was crazy for me, the mother of four small children, to jump out of a plane, but I'm a risk taker and I don't let worrying keep me from achieving my goals.

In the week leading up to the event, it was difficult to keep the secret from my husband. I had to pack comfortable clothes for him and hide them in the trunk. I asked my in-laws to watch our kids and told my husband that we were going on a surprise date. All week I was excited and nervous, but somehow, I avoided letting it slip before we got to Skydive Kentucky. When he finally figured it out, the look on his face was priceless!

The real "date" part of the afternoon happened in the two hours it took to get trained and strapped into parachutes, and then waiting to get onto the plane--all with no access to our phones. But soon we found ourselves each strapped to a different skydiving instructor, packed like sardines in a tiny plane with no door, and as soon as the engines started it was way too loud for any conversation.

The plane climbed into a perfect blue sky until we reached 10,000 feet. I watched my husband slide out of the plane and disappear into the vast expanse of blue. Thirty seconds later it was my turn and adrenaline kicked in like nothing I've experienced before. I was euphoric! The rush of the wind was thunderous in my ears and I could feel my hair being violently whipped around. I loved the freefall--it was 30 seconds of pure bliss. Then the chute opened with a jerk and I felt a little carsick as we rocked back and forth like a sailboat on the ocean.

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Time was frozen as I looked out towards the hazy horizon and surveyed the miniature features down on the ground. I enjoyed the scenery quietly, but my husband narrated his experience the whole way down, including “best birthday present ever!”.

When it was over, so many feelings washed over me. I had a sense of disbelief and shock at what I had just done and pride for what I had accomplished. I felt exhausted as the adrenaline left my system, just like I do after speaking in front of a crowd. Still, skydiving turned out to be one of the greatest experiences of my life!

It occurred to me later that skydiving is a lot like Public Health 3.0 and the work we’re doing here together. I could have listened to the people who thought I was crazy to go skydiving or let anxiety overcome my resolve and refused to jump. We could also have listened to the people that said it would be too hard to implement Public Health 3.0. We could have let fear of change keep us from making the progress that was necessary. It helped me to take the risk of skydiving knowing that it was important to my husband and knowing that we would be going through the experience together. I know that every single one of you works in public health because you know how important our work is to our community, and you believe that everyone in our community deserves the opportunity to thrive. Knowing that we are on this journey together energizes me and I hope that it energizes you as well.

Before deciding to jump out of that plane, I did research and learned that tandem skydiving is safe. According to the data, I was more likely to be struck by lightning or crash my car on the way to the airport than to die in a tandem skydiving accident. Data drives everything we do in public health as well. Data provides the information that we need to make good decisions and points the way forward in our work.

It took bold action and courage from all of us to restructure our department two years ago to meet the challenges of Public Health 3.0. It was a little scary and required a leap of faith. The goals may have seemed hazy and far away, and sometimes the new way might feel like a freefall. Unlike my adventure this weekend, which was over in minutes, our health equity journey will take a generation or two. To me, our journey is no less exhilarating for unfolding in slow motion.

I wouldn’t have been able to successfully navigate my first jump without the help of a veteran skydiver. Someone helped me to strap on my parachute, safely exit the plane and lift my legs for landing. When it comes to public health, we are the experienced veteran. Public Health 3.0 requires that public health departments be the GPS navigation system that leads our community towards improved population health and fosters health equity in our city. We must engage with community stakeholders from both the public and private sectors and we must continue to form partnerships to guide the changes that must be made to improve the health of our community.

Finally, when I was up at 10,000 feet, I had to relinquish control and trust that my tandem partner had the experience necessary to guide me safely to the ground. The work we do in public health is so vast, and changes so rapidly, that I can’t control everything at LMPHW either. I trust in each and every one of you to do the work, to represent us in the community and to be the change that will bring about a Louisville where everyone and every neighborhood thrives. You have the experience, the compassion and the drive to make that happen. Thank you all for being bold public health leaders and taking this wild and wonderful journey with me.



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