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Life on the Wire

Nik Wallenda wants your toes to curl and your heart to pound in terror, but he doesn't want you to look away—he's got an amazing show for you. A seventh-generation aerialist and son of the famed Flying Wallendas circus troupe, he has spent his life treating audiences to truly heart-in-mouth spectacles, in person and through live television.

He has stretched the limits of the sport of high-wire walking, crossing 1,500 feet above a Grand Canyon gorge on a dangerously swaying cable with no harness or net. He was the first to cross directly above Niagara Falls through swirling wind and mist so heavy that he was at times blinded. And in March 2020, he topped all that by walking through corrosive fumes across the crater of an active volcano in Nicaragua, above a magma lake at more than 2,000 degrees. And he can't wait to do more.

"Before I got to the other side of the volcano, I was already thinking of 15 other events I could do," Wallenda, 42, says.

Growing Up Wallenda

Wallenda was just 18 months old when his mother first put him on a tightrope in the backyard. This was normal parenting practice in the family, as his sister, cousin, and other relatives also trained from an extremely young age. His mother, Delilah, even walked the wire while pregnant with him, so you could certainly say he was born into the lifestyle.

A favorite saying of his great-grandfather, the legendary circus performer Karl Wallenda, is Wallenda's truth: "Life is on the wire, and everything else is just waiting."

The family traces their acrobatic history back over 200 years to Germany. They moved to the U.S. in the 1930s after John Ringling saw their act in Havana and hired them for his "Greatest Show on Earth," according to *The New York Times*. Wallenda holds multiple Guinness World Records, including the steepest tightrope walk, highest blindfolded walk, highest wire crossing on a bicycle, and tallest four-person pyramid on a high wire.

His wife, Erendira, is also from a long circus lineage. “She comes from seven generations in the business on one side, and eight on the other,” Wallenda says. According to the *Washington Post*, he called her a “ballerina in the air” after she hung by her teeth from a helicopter over Niagara Falls, breaking Wallenda’s iron-jaw world record.

Contrary to what some might think, his family didn’t pressure him to carry on the tradition. “My parents saw the struggles of the entertainment and circus world and did everything they could to push me out of the industry,” Wallenda says. “When you’re in front of a live audience from the age of two—that’s when I started performing, not on the wire but as a clown—there’s that attraction,” he says. “I was passionate about it.”

His three adult children have careers in the military and health care. “They all are really good at walking the wire, but we never let them do it in front of an audience. It was to protect them from that itch, that bug, and let them make their own decisions when they got older,” Wallenda says.

There’s a video of Wallenda walking between two skyscrapers in Chicago for a 2014 TV special. In the wide shots, the silhouette of his body looks like a bird flying through the air, the balance pole extending like wings on either side. The cable slopes up at 19 degrees, the steepest ever recorded by Guinness World Records.

As he ascended, he spoke into a mic. “What an incredibly beautiful city at night Chicago is,” he said, as casually as if he weren’t teetering on a cable the diameter of a penny. “God is in control,” he added. At the top, he took an elevator to the ground, went back to the tower, and put on a blindfold to walk another tightrope. Another Guinness World Record. Small wonder the media has dubbed him the King of the High Wire.

Wallenda, like others in his family, typically eschews a harness or safety net whenever local ordinances and his contracts permit. Life on the wire is normal to the Wallendas, but the family has endured tragedies over the decades. The patriarch, Karl, lost his life in a fall from a tightrope on a beachfront in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1978. Wallenda speaks openly about the accidents. “Seven [family members] fell in 1962,” Wallenda says. “In 2017, we fell doing an eight-person pyramid, and there were serious injuries.”

Wallenda and his sister, Lijana, were rehearsing the intricate formation in Sarasota, Florida, when their moving pyramid suddenly collapsed. Wallenda and two performers managed to catch the line, but the others hit the ground. Lijana landed face-first and nearly died, with surgeons requiring more than 70 screws and plates to repair her broken bones. Badly shaken, Wallenda nevertheless found substitute performers, did a modified show, and locked away his trauma to fulfill the contract. He wrote about the emotional aftermath in his book, *Facing Fear: Step Out in Faith and Rise Above What’s Holding You Back*.

Calculated Risk

The fall affected him mentally, for a bit. Accidents are always going to happen, Wallenda says. “My risks seem more intense because I’m walking on a wire, but it’s a very calculated risk,” he says. “Do I arrogantly say that I’ll never fall? No. It’s risky and dangerous—and it could take my life at some point, but I train as hard as I can so that that doesn’t happen.”

“I absolutely trip. In training, it happens often,” Wallenda says. “Sometimes, on the ground, you trip,” he says. “However, if I trip up there, it could cost me my life. But for me, walking on the wire is the same as walking on the ground.”

In his early 40s, Wallenda says wire walking hasn't gotten physically more difficult over time. Wallenda family members tend to age with extreme grace, often continuing on the high wire into their 70s or 80s. "It's our passion," Wallenda says. "Tell Tiger Woods to stop golfing or Michael Jordan to stop playing basketball—it's not going to happen."

He shares the story of his mother having a hip replacement in her 60s. "She had to convince her surgeon to put in an athletic hip instead of a regular one for average people," Wallenda says. "My mom said, 'No, I'm an athlete. I need the titanium hip.'" Six months afterward, he and Delilah—and her new hip—walked together on a tightrope 100 feet in the air for a show in Tampa.

As he gets older, Wallenda notices the difference more on the mental side of things. "You think a little more before you do things," he says. "In my book, *Facing Fear*, I wrote about the psyche and the internal dialogue that we all deal with as we get older," Wallenda says.

"Fear can hold us back from success, from who we're created to be," Wallenda says, "but it's a stepping-stone."

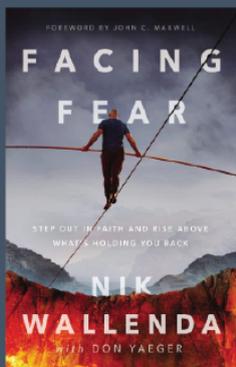
"Failure creates fear ... without failure, you can't get to success," he says.

Wallenda draws a comparison to an investor's fear of losses and how that can hold them back from stock market success. He recalls his first meeting with a financial advisor. "My advisor did a risk analysis. It's to see how risk averse you are and how much risk you want to take in the stock market." After Wallenda completed the questions, the advisor was astonished, saying, "Wow. Never in my career have I seen someone who wants to take that much risk with their money."

All In

With finances, with life, and with performances, that's how I am, Wallenda says. "I'm all in. If I get knocked down, I'll invest again until I win," He says his career has afforded him the opportunity to retire comfortably, but he can't imagine doing so.

"I've been extremely blessed, more than I ever dreamed," he says. "I could retire now at 42, but my wife says I'm addicted to work." Beyond wire walking, he and Erendira keep busy with different activities, like any normal family. "I do house remodeling. We buy and flip houses," Wallenda says. "But when I'm doing that, I can't wait till the next big walk."



Facing Fear: Step Out in Faith and Rise Above What's Holding You Back

The Flying Wallenda family has been tempting fate for generations, and fate hasn't always been kind. Despite fatal high-wire accidents that killed, paralyzed, and seriously injured members of the family in 1962, 1978, and, most recently, in 2017, the rope-walking Wallendas refuse to let tragedy hold them back.

In the memoir, *Facing Fear: Step Out in Faith and Rise Above What's Holding You Back*, fans can learn more about Nik Wallenda's personal journey back to the high wire after the family's 2017 tragic accident during which five circus performers tumbled about 25 feet.

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