



# Always pulling a STUNT

## Lyons Township man enjoys his two dangerous careers

By LISA M. SCHMELZ

FOR WALWORTH COUNTY SUNDAY

Lots of people have second jobs, but most don't have to fall out of a Chicago high-rise to make some extra cash.

Then again, most people with second jobs aren't stunt performers.

Meet Mark Harper of Lyons Township, a firefighter for the last 29 years and a stuntman and stunt rigger for the last 20.

"If it's up high, on fire or in the water, I'm working," said Harper, 51. "Everybody gets into this business because they have a real special skill."

As a fire captain in northern Illinois, Harper leads an elite group of personnel whose department specializes in water and high rescue. He broke into stunt work by chance, working a rodeo with a friend who was in the stunt business. From that brief encounter wrangling livestock, he found a second calling.

In addition to working full-time as a fire captain, Harper averages two motion pictures per year. He's also done a number of TV series and commercial spots. Maybe you saw him fall out of a bus for Alaskan Airlines, or maybe you saw him save that old lady by rappelling into a burning building on "Early Edition," a TV series, featuring actor Kyle Chandler.

If you catch the remake of "Nightmare on Elm Street" in theaters this spring, you won't see him. But when Freddy Krueger's face is fully engulfed in flames, he'll be right next to him, just out of the frame.

"I put Freddie's fire out," Harper said. "I did some car chases, too."

But the crowning piece in Harper's stable of stunts was his work on "The Dark Knight."

In a climactic scene, five SWAT team members are yanked off the 42nd floor of an under-construction skyscraper with help from the Caped Crusader.

Watch it in slow motion and you'll see Harper. He's the last guy to fall.

"I was the fattest, oldest, most disposable guy so I had to be last," Harper said, adding that for reasons of physics, the five stuntmen left the building in weight order.

Naturally, this is the sort of scene a stunt performer wants to nail the first time, and while it went off without a hitch, Oscar-nominated director Christopher Nolan wasn't happy with the lighting, Harper said.

So all five stuntmen agreed to take the plunge again.

The second take, though, would prove to be a face-breaker for Harper.

As he was dropping into the dark night of Chicago yet again, an 11-millimeter back-up rope secured to another stuntman whipped across his face.

The force from the rope sent blood pouring from his nose and into his safety goggles. When his goggles filled, he began bleeding onto the stuntman dangling below him. By the time Harper was lowered to the ground, his face was swollen beyond recognition.

"I didn't look real great for the wrap party," he said. "But all the

**"If it's up high, on fire or in the water, I'm working."**

— Mark Harper



TERRY MAYER/STAFF

**Sitting still isn't something Mark Harper of Lyons Township does all that often. As a fire captain in Schaumburg, Ill., and a professional stunt man in movies and on TV, he's more likely to be climbing or jumping off of tall buildings or squealing the tires in a car chase.**

studio executives knew who I was."

So what's it like to fall out of a skyscraper?

"That was, without a doubt, the most amazing thing I have

ever been a part of," Harper said. "We spent weeks preparing. I was actually pulled out of that building by the weight of four people free-falling."

Connected by heavily

anchored cables, back-up ropes and a series of counter-weights, Harper and the four other stuntmen didn't crash into the

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## Medical crisis sent struggling family into financial tailspin; love pulled them through

*Editor's note: The Time is Now to Help was founded by a local businessman who knew extreme poverty as a child. With the help of donations from the community, The Time is Now is able to help local residents in need.*



life. He had to have further surgery to remove the infection and this has become much more complicated than we ever thought possible. He has a long recovery and rehabilitation ahead of him. He is lucky to be alive.

I have had to drive our old car to the city every day to be with him. We have two young children whom I need to be home for

at night. During the day, my mother has been watching them so they don't see their dad in the hospital so sick.

We were having financial problems before this surgery, but my husband could not put off the surgery any longer. He is self-employed. We are behind in our utilities and I really need help with the gas costs from the daily drive into the city.

My parents are in no condition to help any further than child care. They go month to month barely making ends meet. I work part time but had to give that up

for now to care for my husband.

My husband had no trouble supporting his family by running his own business — until this recession hit. Now that he physically can't do the work he was doing, and we don't know if he ever will be able to again, we are really worried.

I tell him to not stress himself and worry because it won't help him to heal and gain his strength back. I try to not worry in front of him but I am more scared than I have ever been.

Scared, devoted wife

**Dear Readers,**

This letter is yet another reason why we need good health care reform in our country. Many families become homeless due to an illness and not having health insurance. I receive many letters each week from families struggling due to an illness and health care expenses. There are no easy answers, but it is a major cause of poverty that needs to be addressed.

This devoted wife was tireless-

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## STUNT

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ground. Instead they fell a few stories and then just hung out — literally.

“We hung upside down for about 10 minutes,” Harper said. “Hundreds of feet in the air?” “Yes” Harper said.

And then?  
“Then, they lowered us one-by-one onto a platform that had been constructed for us,” he explained.

The skyscraper fall earned Harper and the rest of the stunt group a Screen Actors Guild award for Outstanding Performance by a Stunt Ensemble in a Motion Picture.

Harper’s gravity-defying experience has come in handy at his “day job” too.

“For many years, he’s been jumping off of roofs and high-rises here in Schaumburg,” said Dave Schumann, the village fire chief.

Schumann said Harper’s dual careers are a perfect fit.

“Knowing Mark’s demeanor and his approach to life, it really

## CHECK IT OUT

Find out more about Mark Harper’s work at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0363924/>

For footage of the Chicago “Dark Knight” stunt, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5VZ0IBBxOA>

doesn’t surprise me at all that he does this kind of work,” Schumann said. “He’s calm and cool under stressful situations.”

So does his wife, Peg, and the mother of their five grown children, worry he’ll be seriously injured on a film?

“No, because he’s a fireman. That worries me more,” she said. “They plan what they do in these films. They practice. You don’t get to do that in a fire.”

That doesn’t stop her husband from enjoying his stunt work, though. And retirement’s not an option he’s even considering.

“I’ll do it as long as I can,” Harper said. “Even when I can’t perform the stunts, I can still rig them.”



TERRY MAYER/STAFF

Mark Harper, part-time stunt man, smiles with Bruce Wayne’s Bid, one of the horses at his home in Lyons Township. Both Harper and the horse appeared in the 2005 movie “Batman Begins.”

## HELP

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ly caring for her husband and her family while he was recovering from a life-threatening infection. She had to keep her husband positive, giving him loving care to keep him fighting back and wanting to live. It will be a long road of rehab and rest.

This will put all his business plans on hold for much longer than they had planned. His job involves physical labor and he will be unable to do that work for quite a while. Until he is home and recovering, his wife will be unable to work full time. She has been able to resume her part time job just to keep food on the table. They have fallen behind on their rent and utilities. She has applied for assistance but found there are long

waiting lists everywhere she turns.

The Time Is Now to Help was able to assist her with gas vouchers for her daily drives to the hospital, utility assistance and rent. We also reminded her about the W.C. Food Pantry. She had heard about it but had not been there yet. She promised to go there. Their cabinets and refrigerator were almost empty. Her mother had been helping with food, but she did not have the income to be helping like that for long.

When we last spoke, her husband had completed his second surgery. He was home and going for regular rehabilitation. He was already looking forward to going back to work. He said his wife’s devotion and love got him through it all.

Prior to the illness, they were just making it each month. The recession had taken its toll on them. To save money, the family,

## HELP

- **What:** The Time is Now can be contacted by mail or online only.
- **Mail:** P.O. Box 70, Pell Lake, WI 53157.
- **Online:** [www.timeisnowtohelp.org](http://www.timeisnowtohelp.org).

including the grandparents, stretched their meals to last several days. The father struggled to work every day with an old injury that required a surgical repair. When he became ill after the surgery, they fell farther and farther into poverty. The father wanted to give up but the wife came to the hospital armed with a photo of their two children. Her love and persistence restored in him the fight for his life. The infection caught in the

hospital was extremely serious. The doctors and nurses several times tried to prepare her for the worst.

The financial problems at home became so bad she lived with the constant fear of homelessness and utilities being disconnected. The wife finally told her husband everything she was worrying about while he was in the hospital. She told him how The Time Is Now to Help stepped in and offered a helping hand when she needed it most. He was proud of her for her strength during his long illness and her love saw him through. The wife was happy to report she had finally gotten a full-time job. This will help them pay the bills until her husband returns to work.

Thank you for caring and sharing.

*Health and happiness,  
God Bless Everyone, W.C.*

*A very special thank you:*

*Dorothy Heffernan, ITW Foundation, Paper Dolls, Flitcroft Septic Systems, CB3 Financial Group, David and Shirley Heigl, June Davidsen, Michael Glass, Judy Dishneau, Darrylin Blackburn, Gerald and Marilyn Wilkin, Tom and Joyce Roche, Johanna Sterken, Dan and Regina Mehring, Patti Wagon Ice Cream, Marilyn Hauser, Martin O’Brien, Drescher Family Charitable Foundation, W.C. Family Resource Center / Food Pantry volunteers, Michael and Sue Borden, Dick and Jean Honeyager, all of you who support The Time Is Now to Help donation boxes and the businesses that allow our donation boxes.*

*Anyone who would like a Time Is Now donation box in your business, please call (262)249-7000.*