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Doug Moe: Free-falling into spotlight

McFarland mom sky-high as dream realized

By Doug Moe

IT'S DEBATABLE whether **Mary Jo Hamre** of McFarland was more nervous jumping out of the airplane or jumping to the conclusion that, yes, this was all about her, and there was no avoiding the spotlight.

Hamre, 36, does not like to be the center of attention. She has spent much of her life helping others and asking nothing in return.

Well, almost nothing. On Sunday morning, April 29, Hamre was asking her 10-year-old son, **Dustin**, to try to stay awake in church. The boy had been to a sleepover the night before and kept dozing off as Pastor **Wayne Shannon** spoke at McFarland's United Church of Christ.

Because she was engaged with her son, Mary Jo didn't really realize that her husband, **Jim Hamre**, had been called up by



Submitted photo

Mary Jo Hamre sky-dives from 11,000 feet on April 29 with an instructor from Seven Hills Skydivers Club near Marshall.



Pastor Shannon to say a few words. That wasn't all that unusual, anyway. The Hamres are active in the church. Much of Mary Jo's volunteer work originates there, be it a mission trip to Mexico or, as was the case most recently, an alternative spring break trip to Washington, D.C., to assist the homeless.

But on April 29, Mary Jo soon realized that Jim was up in front of everyone in church and he was talking about her, and all her good work, which started back in high school in tiny Sharon, Wis., when Mary Jo raised the third-most money nationally in a drive to benefit Special Olympics.

You might imagine that Mary Jo was thrilled to hear her husband talk about her in such glowing terms. You might think that, but you would be wrong.

"My first thought was, 'He's a dead man,'" Mary Jo was saying Thursday. "I don't like a lot of attention."

Of course, that was before she saw the limousine.

This all started in mid-April, when Jim Hamre was watching the "Live with Regis and Kelly" television show and heard about the program's "Mom's Dream Come True" contest, which annually awards seven special mothers a Mother's Day gift of having an unfulfilled dream come true. As a bonus, the lucky moms get a trip to New York to appear on TV with **Regis Philbin** and **Kelly Ripa**.

On April 14, Jim posted an online entry. He wrote about Mary Jo being a great mother to her five kids, a full-time student at Madison Area Technical College, and with it all a selfless volunteer in her community and beyond.

Submitted photo

Hamre said "that first step out of the airplane onto nothing is about the most exhilarating feeling I have ever had." She's shown here at Seven Hills with her husband, Jim, and their children (clockwise from bottom) Jarod, Brenna, Dustin and Madison.

Jim, who is an MATC grad himself and spoke at commencement in 1999, told me: "She's the type of individual who gives and gives to the point where there's nothing left to give."

Just two days after Jim sent the entry, a producer from the show called with the message, "She is under consideration."

A week went by, and the producer called again. Mary Jo had been chosen. Now all Jim had to do was help them work out the logistics of getting a film crew to

McFarland to capture both Mary Jo's surprise on learning she'd won as well as her realizing her dream of skydiving -- and do it all without Mary Jo finding out ahead of time.

Jim enlisted Pastor Shannon and others to help. At church that Sunday, the pastor mentioned that a local film crew might be shooting some footage -- it was, of course, the "Live" crew. Then, when the service was done, Pastor Shannon asked everyone to stay seated for a small announcement. That's when Jim got up and read what he had written about Mary Jo when he nominated her.

"There wasn't a dry eye in the house," he recalled, and the tears didn't stop when Jim said the show had picked Mary Jo and maybe everyone should step outside. That's where the limousine was waiting to take the Hamres to the Seven Hills Skydivers Club near Marshall.

"I'm not a huge thrill-seeker," Mary Jo said, while adding that she has always been fascinated by skydiving. Still, she said, "I might never have done it on my own."

At Seven Hills, she got a short-course lesson in skydiving, then was taken up to 11,000 feet where she made a tandem jump with an instructor. Her reaction?

"That first step out of the airplane onto nothing is about the most exhilarating feeling I have ever had," Mary Jo said. "I'd love to do it again."

On Tuesday, the Hamres flew to New York City, and Mary Jo taped the "Regis and Kelly" episode, which aired today. At the taping, Mary Jo got yet another surprise: the gift of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, as riding a motorcycle was another unrealized dream. After the taping, they did some tourist things like the Staten Island Ferry, and they saw the Broadway show "Wicked" from 10th-row seats courtesy of "Regis and Kelly."

They flew home Thursday. That morning, still in New York, Mary Jo was recalling how nervous she had been meeting Philbin and Ripa and going on national TV the day before. Her legs were shaking, she said. Now she was looking forward to getting back to her kids and studying for her MATC finals.

"My legs are still hurting," she said.

From skydiving?

"I think from going on the show," Mary Jo said. "I was just so tense."

And they don't even give you a parachute.

Heard something Moe should know? Call 252-6446, write PO Box 8060, Madison, WI 53708, or e-mail dmoe@madison.com