

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

Philanthropist Mike Arrington sets new record with round canopy jump



by Belinda Lichty Clarke
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Lifelong Evanstonian, philanthropist and Marine Corps veteran Mike Arrington has spent a lot of time — and money — giving back to his hometown. He recently partnered with ETHS to champion and fund the Michael B. Arrington Wellness and Performance Center, a \$500,000 training center at the high school that rivals any top college facility and allows Evanston students, athletes or not, the opportunity to access to top-of-the-line equipment and work with elite trainers.

“Mike Arrington’s generosity to make the weight room at ETHS a reality has impacted thousands of kids’ lives for the better,” said ETHS Athletic Director Chris Livatino. “Mike is a diehard Evanstonian who has been incredible to work with as we serve the student athletes at our school.”



Arrington in 1963 in the United States Marine Corps. Credit:
Photo courtesy of Mike Arrington.

In March, to mark his 82nd birthday, Arrington did something else very special, this time for himself. Not a relaxing week on the beach, though he did recently return from an expedition in the Galapagos where he went diving with schools of hammerhead sharks. Instead, Arrington tapped into something deeper — his profound appreciation for the principles and training he received while in the military in the early 1960s as a member of the Marines’ First Force Reconnaissance Company.

Record-setting jump

Sitting down with Arrington at his family home in Evanston on May 9, I got a firsthand account of how he trained for, and completed, two 1,200-plus foot jumps — solidifying his place as the oldest veteran to complete a military grade round canopy jump.

For those who are not familiar, a canopy parachute, unlike modern chutes today, has a dome-shaped design used in military jumps that uses a static line release to deploy the chute.

Sure, there have been older individuals jumping out of planes, most famously, former President George Bush who went skydiving in 2014 for his 90th birthday. But, as Arrington explained, this is not what we are talking about.

“There is a huge difference!” Arrington said. “Sure, we see someone on the news who’s 103 and does the jump, and yes, it’s great, but tandem (attached to a jump master) is totally different. With the tandems, the instructors hit the ground for you, and then you walk it off. My whole deal was to do this entirely by myself. And that’s why I wanted it.”



Arrington with one of the jump masters from the Round Canopy Parachute Team. Credit: Photo courtesy of Round Canopy Parachute Team (RCPT-USA)

For Arrington’s two non-tandem jumps, which took place on March 25 and 26 in Florida, he not only had to pay a modest fee, he had to persuade the **Round Canopy Parachute Team (RCPT-USA)** in northeast Florida he was not just willing, but able.

The RCPT, whose website home page mantra is “More Than Just a Jump,” is staffed by volunteer jump masters, mainly vets themselves, whose mission is to “highlight the accomplishments of allied paratroopers from WWII onward by fostering camaraderie among individuals who share a passion for round canopy parachuting and inspiration from the actions and deeds of paratroopers past.”

It was months before his birthday when Arrington first reached out to the parachute team, having seen a segment about offering jumps to veterans on TV. He was told, respectfully, that the age maximum

was 65. Beyond that, they said, he would have to obtain multiple waivers and approval from his doctors.

Arrington was told, politely, that while they appreciated that he was a Marine veteran, and they didn't want to ruin his dream of jumping, that it probably wasn't in the cards for him, because safety is the No. 1 goal and they didn't want to mar their pristine track record.

"Well, you don't understand," Arrington said. "I work out seven days a week. I'm in great shape and I can do all the parachute landing preparations. I'll get all the sign-offs from my doctors and my neurosurgeons and primary doctor, and I'll send you jump logs of all the jumps I made in the Marine Corps. I'll even send you pictures."

So, Arrington put together a dossier with everything he did while in the Marines, including sport skydives he did in his time off while in the service.

It worked, but there were still hoops to jump through. Arrington was told before they would put him in a plane, he would have to show them that he could do everything he claimed he could, including practicing dozens of landings, which is the most dangerous part of the jump.

Arrington started training immediately by practicing jumps and landings from a ladder he set up on the beach in Evanston. He was told also that he would have to demonstrate that he could carry the parachute, which weighs about 70 pounds, and run with it.

"So, I went out there [to Florida] and I did all of that stuff," Arrington said. "And they said they didn't think I could do it — but I had earned the right to jump."



And so, two days after his 82nd birthday, on March 25, Arrington completed his first jump since July 7, 1974, setting an age record for a round canopy jump, according to the RCPT-USA.

"Were you nervous?" I asked, having watched this [video](#) produced by the RCPT which seems to show Arrington getting pushed out of the

Mike Arrington on the day of his record-setting jump. Credit: plane.
Photo courtesy of Round Canopy Parachute Team (RCPT-USA).

“No!” he exclaimed, adding that he did not need a push. “That was the jumpmaster tapping me and giving the go-ahead to jump. You have to go when he says go.”

Sticking the landing

Arrington added that everyone thinks it’s the jumping out of the plane part that’s the scariest, but really, it’s the landing you need to worry about.

“That’s where you get in to trouble, because you can really mess up your knees, and worse,” he said.

Which is why you practice the landing again and again, he said, because when you land, you need to keep your legs together and roll to one side so the shock is absorbed in your calf, your thighs, up through your shoulder, and then your back. Then, he added, you roll to the other side, so both sides of your body are absorbing the brunt of the shock.

Arrington added that before the landing, you turn the chute into the wind to slow down, but of course you’re still coming in really fast, which is why nailing the landing is so critical.

But that’s not all, he said.

“The chute is 50 feet wide, so it drags you on the ground,” he said. “You’ve got to get up right away and then collapse that canopy, otherwise it’ll just drag you, because basically it’s a big sail. So, yeah, the landing is the scariest part.”

That morning, Arrington completed both jumps flawlessly, unlike a few of his comrades-in-arms.

“One guy broke his hip, and completely separated his hip from his femur,” Arrington said. “Another guy twisted his foot 180 degrees, so we had two hospitalizations that day.”

Recollecting his achievement, Arrington says that one of the most special parts for him was that everyone was ex-military — part of a brotherhood that continues to have a profound effect on him.

“There is just a certain level of respect that you don’t see in civilian life,” Arrington said. “We have such great respect for one another. So, we say, ‘yes, sir,’ and ‘yes, ma’am,’ regardless of rank and that’s just the way it is.”

More to give, more to do

As for what’s next, Arrington said he’s working with the District 202 superintendent on establishing a scholarship to fund college and vocational education opportunities for ETHS students, because Evanston has given him, and his children and grandchildren, so much.

“I don’t want to see a kid from Evanston not have an opportunity or miss out because he or she can’t afford something,” he said. “So, I am working on a college scholarship program as part of my estate, that will continue years into the future.”

Which isn’t to say Arrington is slowing down any time soon. After completing his two jumps with the RCPT, he is qualified to jump with that team from here on out whenever he wants. He’s also mulling another canopy jump next year — this time in Normandy.



Pins in a map hanging in Arrington’s study. He has visited more than 140 countries in his lifetime so far! Credit: Belinda Clarke