

She Floats Through the Air

For Amy Wagers, the adrenaline rush of getting a paper accepted for publication is nothing compared to what comes next: a 10,000-foot fall from an airplane. Wagers, an HHMI early career scientist at Harvard Medical School, has a tradition of skydiving with the first author of each of her lab's major research articles. For most who agree to join her, plummeting through the sky is a once in a lifetime experience.

Wagers, however, is no stranger to soaring through midair. She took up the flying trapeze when she was a postdoc at Stanford University.

She wanted a hobby to take her mind off science after a particularly grueling week of lab work, and a friend mentioned the San Francisco School of Circus Arts. "I thought that sounded pretty fun," says Wagers. "I went to a trapeze class and absolutely loved it." She became a regular at the school.

"It's really pretty thrilling," she says. When it's her turn to jump, Wagers climbs to a 23-foot-high platform and reaches for the trapeze bar dangling in front of her. With her toes on the

very edge of the platform, she can glimpse the net below.

"At that moment, standing up there, there's that rush of intimidation," says Wagers. "Then when you actually jump, it's very focusing. You have to listen and you have to not hesitate. It's all about timing."

When Wagers landed a faculty spot at Harvard Medical School studying stem cells and aging, she thought her days of flying trapeze were over. She discovered, however, that the Trapeze School of New York has a branch in Reading, Massachusetts, just a half-hour drive from Harvard. Located above the food court of a massive Jordan's Furniture store, it has a different feel from the circus school in San Francisco.

"There are families sitting there, eating ice cream and watching you," says Wagers. "If you miss a catch everyone goes 'Aaah' and if you make it everyone claps."

Wagers had always loved heights, but her spontaneous foray into trapeze made her curious to try other sky-high stunts. When she and another junior faculty member at Harvard collaborated on their first paper and got positive comments from *Nature*, Wagers came up with a plan: "If this very first paper for both of us gets in," she told her collaborator, "we're going skydiving." The paper was accepted, and Wagers booked a sky dive in Newport, Rhode Island. Though her



collaborator conveniently forgot the date of the booking, Wagers went ahead and jumped. "Then I decided whenever my lab had an important paper published, I would go skydiving."

On the trapeze, Wagers has learned several basic maneuvers, including the knee hang, in which she suspends herself upside down from the bar by only her knees. She says her love of flying trapeze is going to stay a hobby, though—a way to clear her mind of science for just those few terrifying seconds up on the platform. "I'm still very much a novice," she says. "I'm definitely not leaving science for the circus." —Sarah C.P. Williams

FOR MORE INFORMATION: To learn more about Amy Wagers' research, see "Young Again" on page 42.