



High-Wire Artist Nik Wallenda: The Reason for My Next Stunt

By Michelle Tauber | 10/27/2014



When Nik Wallenda crosses a tightrope 50 stories above the Chicago River this Sunday, he'll do so without a harness.

No net, either.

Oh, but he will have on a blindfold. At night. In one of the Windy City's gustiest corridors.

So, is this a death wish?

"It isn't at all," the renowned high-wire artist 35, tells PEOPLE. "For me, this is living life. To not be on a wire is not living to me."

The stunt marks the biggest challenge yet for Wallenda, whose previous high-wire walks over the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls were watched by millions.

The Chicago walk poses several significant new obstacles: In addition to the wind and likely frigid temperatures, he's also tackling his steepest walk ever – a 15-degree angle rising approximately eight stories between the Marina City west tower and the Leo Burnett building.

Some 50 stories below? The bone-chilling waters of the Chicago River.

The incline "changes your center of gravity, the way you balance," says Wallenda, a seventh-generation wire walker whose family troupe, the Flying Wallendas, has a famed history of triumph and tragedy. "Usually with wire walking, the biggest strain is on my arms with that 45 lb. balancing pole. But this is really a strain on my legs, my arms and my back. I'm using a lot more muscle control."

Then there's the blindfold, which he'll wear for the second portion of the walk, stretching between the Marina City towers.

Inspired by a late relative, Angel Wallenda, who lost a leg to cancer but later walked the wire with a prosthetic limb, "I thought, 'I wonder if I could do what I do without my vision?' That's kind of where it all started," he says. "I proved to myself, 'Yes, I can do it. And I can do it safely.'"

To train for the walk, he has been practicing in his hometown of Sarasota, Fla., and instructing his support team to do everything they can to push him off the wire.

"My wife, my mom, my father, they are physically pushing me," he says. "All my guys have been shoving me, which is way tougher than any 45 m.p.h. wind gust. They are really making me work hard, which is what I want."

The self-described "family man that does what daredevils do" has the full support of his wife of 14 years, Erendira, and parents, Terry and Delilah, all of whom are veteran wire walkers themselves. "This is the way we choose to live and the way we have chosen to live for 200 years. It's what we enjoy, it's what we love, it's what we have a passion for. I hope it's inspiring to people: If you work hard enough, you can do anything."