

# To fly on an invisible river of air

BY MARLENE FARRELL

**S**am Bryant, a Cashmere native, stands atop a tall grassy hill in Hay Canyon.

He and Denise Reed, his mentor and friend, have just driven up a steep rutted road that climbs 800 feet above a wide meadow. It's a stunning view of cloud-scraping mountains with Cashmere and orchards nestled below.

Sam and Denise are here, not just to enjoy the view, but also to become part of it. They are paragliders, and this is their launch.

They spend long minutes reading the air. "It's like understanding an invisible river," said Denise. They look for clues in the windsock, the ruffled grass, dust devils in the distance, and a hawk circling overhead.

If the conditions are right, Sam lays out his gear. Out of his pack comes the blue, red and yellow wing, which is 30 feet long, and slender, made of rip-stop nylon. It's connected to his harness by a web of thin lines, fanning out from his controls to evenly spaced spots on the wing.

The wing itself is two ply, with ribs between the upper and lower surfaces and open and closed cells that inflate to an airfoil crescent.

The preparations and safety checks over, Sam takes a few backward steps to inflate the wing and get it off the ground, and then he turns toward the launch and takes a few more steady steps, down a slight

grade. His motion, combined with the wind and the launch grade are enough to pull him skyward for a flight of a few minutes or a few hours.

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Sam had his first taste of paragliding 20 years ago when he took a three-day introduction course with Aerial Paragliding at Hay Canyon Ranch.

The lesson starts with a discussion of equipment and safety protocols. Sam said, "The Ranch's safety record is impeccable. For every single flight, you go through the checklist with your instructor.

"But also on that first day they will get you off the ground. They'll run behind you, controlling your lines for you. Your feet will come off the ground about three feet, and you'll fly 100 feet.

"Next they take you to a bench above the first hill. This time you're 30-40 feet off the ground and travel for 1,000 feet. Then, once you're ready, you'll go to Don's Launch, the big hill. You get a few hundred feet off the ground and the flight lasts for eight minutes. You have time to look around and relax. You will know then if this is the sport for you."

After his introductory lessons, life got hectic, so Sam put paragliding on hold.

He has always found outlets for adventure, however. He can be found, depending on the season, skiing the slopes of Mission Ridge, fishing local lakes and rivers, or scuba diving, some-



times in the tropical waters off Honduras.

In 2001 Sam suffered the loss of his left hand in a snow blowing accident that also led to his retirement as a steamfitter.

There were new challenges. Sam said, "It's a steep learning curve, but over time you figure out how to do things you didn't think you could have done." He might not be able to tie shoes tightly, but he's come up with innovative ways to pursue his passions. "I retested on my motorcycle and didn't even have to modify it."

A decade later, in 2011, Sam found himself hanging around the house a lot. "My wife, Roxanne, told me to go find some-

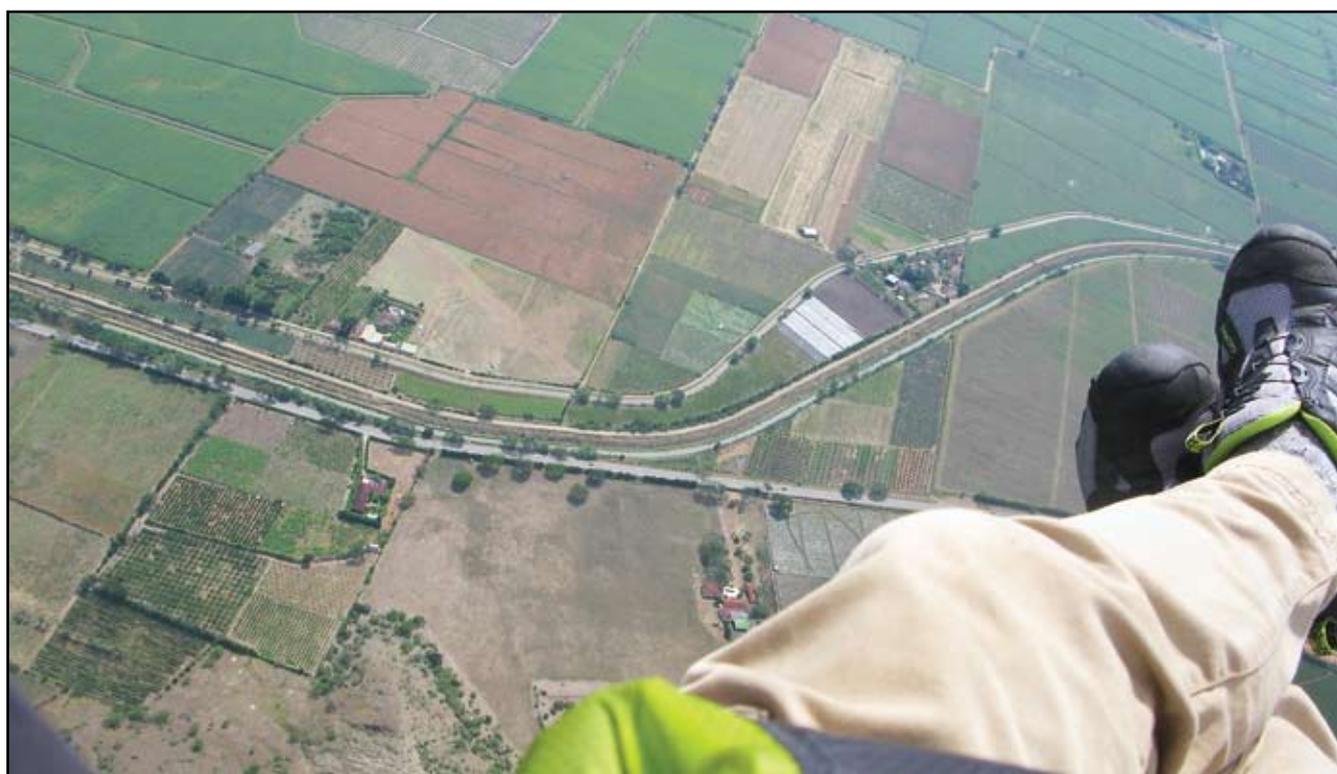
thing to do. The very next day I said, 'I'm starting paragliding.' She said, 'It's about time.'"

Doug Stroup and Denise Reed, the current and internationally respected owners of Aerial Paragliding, didn't hesitate to start Sam on a training progression, which had to be unique given his handicap.

Normally, a pilot controls the wing with a Kevlar line held in each hand. After a few prototypes, Sam now uses a wrist guard that Doug designed. The line is fed through a buckle, enabling Sam's left arm to finesse the line as well as his right hand.

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The paragliding season starts as soon as there are clear dry



One of the many amazing views for a paragliding pilot. Here, Sam flies above Roldanillo, Colombia, where he traveled with paragliding friends.

Sam Bryant practices kiting, or ground manoeuvres, on a Cashmere soccer field. Photo by Kevin Farrell

roads, which was several weeks early this year, in early April. The Ranch's 2,200 acres are situated to take advantage of anabatic flow, which are thermal-driven winds that channel up the canyons in a predictable way.

It's the midday heat, especially in the summer months, that serves as the breeding ground for thermals. That's when Sam goes to The Ranch almost daily to fly or help with lessons.

Sam and the other pilots, like their avian counterparts, seek out the thermals to pull them

high in the sky where they can coast, and spiral and slowly descend. But where thermals go up, there are also pockets of air moving down, and paragliders learn, through experience, how to avoid "falling out" of the thermal.

"You become a good micro-meteorologist if you've been paragliding for awhile. Before you fly, you check the computer models for things like barometric pressure changes and thunderstorm likelihood."

For the miracle of flight, it's a relatively inexpensive sport. For all his lessons, two different wings, two harnesses, and all the necessary computer gadgetry, Sam has invested about \$7,500, which is less than more mainstream sports like horseback riding or road bike racing.

And it's a simpler sport than hang gliding, with its large rigid frame and wing. Sam said, "I can be ready to fly in less than five minutes. And all my gear fits into a 45 pound pack."

Sam has tested and passed his P3, which designates him an intermediate through the U.S. Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association.

Looking for the next chal-

lenge, he has competed three times, with his fourth, the "Rat Race" at Woodrat Mountain in Oregon, this June. A competition is no small affair. Each one lasts seven days, with each day having a "race to goal."

Last year, unbeknownst to most locals, Chelan hosted the U.S. Nationals. The buttes above town offer powerful thermals that are for experienced pilots only.

A race, like at Chelan, will launch near a house thermal, which is fairly predictable. "There were 120 pilots in the sky on the same thermal, both those in the competitor class and those in the sport class," said Sam, who competes in the sport class. Over the week, competitors collect points based on who flew to each waypoint and on to the finish in the fastest times.

Propped on his chest will be Sam's flight computer, which gives him the waypoints and also reads his current location and elevation. "You have to be within an imaginary cylinder of each waypoint before heading to the next one. When you get close enough, the computer makes a 'happy noise.'" Competitors fly point-to-point as best

they can, but the day's distance is still significant; the pilots will be aloft for two to seven hours.

Roxanne comes along to the events to watch Sam take off. She said, "As I watch, I'm thinking, 'Turn, turn' and 'Core, core.'" Though her words go unheard, Sam heeds them and turns, or spirals, upward, looking for the core of the thermal. Roxanne said, "It never makes me nervous. I know he's cautious."

In a sport of real risks and huge rewards, Sam said the hardest part is mental. "Ego can get in the way. After you've climbed a big hill with your pack, it can be the hardest thing to repack and hike back down (if the wind isn't right). But you have to err on the side of caution."

The exhilaration of flight is hard to put into words.

"When I catch a thermal — I don't know how to describe it. Even the veterans can't describe it. But the first time I did a cross-country flight from Cashmere to Leavenworth, and I touched down, the rush was so great that I couldn't call Roxanne. I couldn't even remember my wife's phone number.