

World Sword Swallower's Day

Dan Meyer leads performance at Ripley's Panama City Beach

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PANAMA CITY BEACH — Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditoriums around the world are celebrating the ninth annual World Sword Swallower's Day on Saturday with free live shows, culminating in a simultaneous swallow of solid steel swords at 2:27:16 p.m.

"It's to promote and honor those who had the courage to risk their lives to entertain people. Sword swallowers were used as guinea pigs. One day of the year you get to see sword swallowers first hand," said Dan Meyer, president of Sword Swallowers Association International, which founded the day in partnership with Ripley's. "Sword swallowing and Ripley's have always gone together. Sword swallowers were at the first Ripley's at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933."

In addition to paying tribute to the 4,000-year practice of sword swallowing, the event raises awareness of sword swallowers' contributions to medicine and science, and money for esophageal cancer research.

"Last year we had 45 sword swallowers around the world at 13 Ripley's," Meyer said. "This year 50-plus are coming to 18 different Ripley's on Saturday." Meyer, a 39-time World

Champion Sword Swallower with seven Guinness World Records, will lead Saturday's demonstration at Ripley's Panama City Beach Odditorium, 9907 Front Beach Road. He will swallow multiple swords, hedge clippers and a car axle, as well as eat fire. Franz Huber of Germany also will join him.

"We are buddies who basically challenge each other," Meyer said.

The group also will include performers from New Orleans and Panama City Beach female sword swallower Darkageon Eyvindur Youngblood, owner of Refined Precision Body Art.

Named the "Most Dangerous Act" and Top 50 Finalist on "America's Got Talent," Meyer received the 2007 Ig Nobel Prize in Medicine at Harvard University for historical medical research on sword swallowing injuries published in the British Medical Journal with co-author Dr. Brian Witcombe.

Meyer's stunts at Ripley's Believe It or Not have included swallowing a 30-inch sword while submerged 20 feet underwater in a tank of 88 sharks and stingrays, and swallowing a sword heated to 1,500 degrees for Stan Lee's Superhumans in 2010 on The History Channel. Discovery also featured Meyer on "The Day I Almost Died" after he

had a close call swallowing five swords at once.

But it was another near-death experience with malaria more than three decades ago that led Meyer on his



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

DAN MEYER

path to sword swallowing. "I was 20 years old, a week before my 21st birthday, and living as a missionary in India. I said a little prayer. I said, 'God, if you let me live till my 21st birthday, I will not let fear rule my life

any longer. I'm going to put my fears to death," Meyer recalled. "It's my calling... I speak to a lot of churches and pastors will say, 'I'm glad it's

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WORLD SWORD SWALLOWER'S DAY

What: Ninth annual celebration founded by Sword Swallowers Association International in partnership with Ripley's Believe It or Not! includes free sword swallowing demonstration and other live performances

Who: SSAI President Dan Meyer, Franz Huber of Germany, Darkageon Eyvindur Youngblood of Panama City Beach and more

When: 1:45 p.m. with official swallow at 2:27:16 p.m. to coincide with the date

Where: Ripley's Panama City Beach Odditorium, 9907 Front Beach Road, Panama City Beach

Cost: Performances are free; admission fee required to tour Odditorium

Details: Ripleys.com, SwordSwallow.org, SwordSwallow.com, CuttingEdgelnertainment.com

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your calling and not mine."

Meyer grew up with extreme fears and tries to use his story as a way to help others overcome fear with faith.

"As a youth, I suffered from low self-esteem and inferiority complex. I vowed as a kid I wanted to do things the boys who were bullying me could not do. I worked my way up to juggling, bed of nails and human blockhead and fire," Meyer said. "In 1997 I met a real sword swallower who gave me two tips — No. 1: This is extremely dangerous. That's why there are only a dozen left. And No. 2: Don't try it — a very big tip that didn't work."

After 13,000 unsuccessful attempts, Meyer swallowed his first sword Feb. 12, 2001.

By unsuccessful, Meyer means he first had to overcome the body's typical gag response. He became certified as a hypnotist to learn how to repress involuntary responses.

"It would hit the back of the throat and the throat would close up," he said. "I found through research it can take two to three years to 10 years to learn to swallow a sword."

The first "hurdle" to swallowing 15- to 30-inch steel blades, he said, is the gag reflex, the peristalsis, in the back of the mouth, then navigating a 90-degree turn behind the Adam's Apple.

"The performer must then learn to align a

sword with the upper esophageal sphincter with the neck hyper extended," Meyer said. "The next step is relaxation of the pharynx and lower esophageal sphincter."

The sword also passes down the cardiac reflex and angles into the stomach.

"I have to nudge my heart to left and back, with my heart leaning against the sword. I can feel the blade beat with my heart," he said.

According to SSAI, an average of four to eight serious sword swallowing injuries are reported around the world annually, though many go unreported.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. When I perform I am trying to preserve and promote the ancient art, but I don't want kids — mainly 14- to 18-year-olds that really latch on — to do it," said Meyer, who has gone on to swallow 21 swords at once. "This morning my wife and I prayed in devotion not to let anyone be injured this year."

Last year, Meyer swallowed 12 swords at once and twisted them 180 degrees.

"I am working on swallowing 14 at once and twisting them for Guinness on Saturday," said Meyer, who has promised his wife, Jill, not to do anything that doesn't feel right. "Even my parents don't understand. They understand the medical part of it — my dad is an X-ray tech and my mom's a nurse — but my dad will ask, 'When



HEATHER LEIPHART | The News Herald

Katy Kilbourne, from left, Ridiculous, and Harley Newman slide swords down their throats in front of Ripley's Believe it or Not for World Sword Swallower's Day on Saturday, Feb. 28, 2015.

are you going to get a real job?"

For World Sword Swallower's Day in 2013, Meyer swallowed a 23-inch sword and used it to pull a 3,700 pound Mini Cooper out of Ripley's in Baltimore.

Though this will be the first time for Meyer to perform at World Sword Swallower's Day in

Panama City Beach, it will be a reunion with Panama City Beach Ripley's General Manager Drew Morales. Morales initially worked at Ripley's in Dallas, where Meyer also has performed, and Morales worked at Ripley's in Baltimore when Meyer pulled the car 12 feet out of the show room.