

Judith Giacoma pushes the hot-air balloon envelope in festival preview



Noelle McGee via The News-Gazette

Judith Giacoma students got a lesson Thursday in hot-air ballooning — and possibly set a world record in the process.

Early that morning, Danville pilot Donna Carlton-Vish and her crew brought her first balloon, Sunny One, to the elementary school in Westville and partially inflated it in the gym.

About 9 a.m., kindergartners through sixth-graders started filing into the large, billowing envelope as it laid on its side.

About 20 minutes later, all of the students and staff members — 749, according to Principal Pamela Dalenberg — were seated inside.

While records have been set for highest balloon flight, largest mass ascent and other feats, "this is the first attempt for most people sitting inside a hot-air balloon envelope that we know about," Carlton-Vish told students, causing them to cheer.

The record attempt took place during a special preview of balloon school, one of the kid- and family-focused events that will take place during the third annual Balloons Over Vermilion festival. The festival — which will feature 30 regular balloons and two special-shape balloons — runs July 13-14 at the Vermilion Regional Airport.

This year, Shelly Jenkins' fourth-graders are serving as the event's student ambassadors, which required them to design their own hot air balloons to be used in promotional material. They will also help organizers decide what activities to feature in the popular Kids' Zone.

For their hard work, the students get to take a tethered balloon ride at the festival. And the entire student body got its own balloon school, put on by Carlton-Vish.

"They have been on a countdown for this day," Jenkins said, as her students watched wide-eyed as cold air from a giant fan blew air into the envelope, causing it to expand and rise within a few feet of the gym ceiling.

"They all said, 'Nobody get sick!'" Jenkins said with a laugh. "Everyone was here on time. No one came in late from breakfast."

The 35-year teaching veteran has tied hot air ballooning into language arts, history, math and science lessons.

"We talked a lot about it during our weather unit, which is part of our curriculum," Jenkins said.

"It fit in really well when we talked about types of clouds, hot air particles, cold air particles. ... They've really enjoyed it."

Many students were seeing a balloon up close for the first time.

They were surprised by how big it is.

"It's like a giant bounce house," said fourth-grader Olivia Moretto.

"It's like the dome of a museum," said fifth-grader Ethan Brown. "You could fit 12 cars in here. Well, maybe not 12, but a lot."

Carlton-Vish has been a pilot since 2001 and currently flies her third balloon, Sunny Side Up.

She told students that Sunny One, which she only uses for teaching, is 80,000 cubic feet when it's fully inflated.

"That's 80,000 basketballs," she said.

Carlton-Vish gave students a brief history of the sport, including that the first manned flight took place in France on Nov. 21, 1783.

"Do you know what the first three things sent up in a balloon were?" she asked, calling on Jenkins' students to help her out.

"A sheep, a duck and a rooster," fourth-grader Sophia Hutchins answered correctly.

Hutchins and her classmates also helped Carlton-Vish name the main parts of the aircraft — the envelope, burners and basket.

They also helped her explain how she makes the balloon rise — by firing the burner — and how she lowers it — by opening a vent in the envelope to let the hot air escape.

"You guys have really been studying," the pilot said.

After the other students returned to their classroom, the young ambassadors stayed behind to help Carlton-Vish and her crew — including local pilots Larry Owen, Brock Gale and Dean Carton — pack up the envelope.

"No pilot can go very far without their crew," Carlton-Vish told them, adding they can get involved even at their age.



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Photo by: Stephen Haas

Danville hot-air balloon pilot Donna Carlton-Vish talks to the 749 students and staff members sitting inside the envelope of her 80,000-cubic-foot balloon, Sunny One, during a preview of the Balloons Over Vermilion festival's balloon school Thursday, May 10, 2018, in the gymnasium at Judith Giacoma Elementary School in Westville.