

BALLOONS OVER VERMILION

SKY-HIGH DESIGN



Noelle McGee/The New-Gazette

Timberly Reed, 8, colors her winking emoji hot-air balloon, one of three designs she made on Monday and over the weekend.

Students add personal flair to balloons' looks

By NOELLE MCGEE
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DANVILLE — When Michelle Esteppe's third graders at Danville's Southwest Elementary School were asked to imagine they were hot-air balloon pilots and design their own balloons,

Kodie Barnes didn't have to think too hard.

The 8-year-old drew the signal used to summon his favorite superhero, Batman, on a sky-blue background.

Classmate Tyler Adams

What's COOL
in SCHOOL

chose to feature Toothless — the title character from the "How to Train Your Dragon" film series — prominently on the front of his balloon.

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Gallery: View more of Noelle McGee's photos from Monday.

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BALLOONS

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"If anyone asks me my favorite movie ... well, I think you know the answer," the 8-year-old said Monday, while putting the finishing touches on the dragon's black coat.

The boys and their classmates are the student ambassadors for this year's Balloons Over Vermilion festival, set for July 12-13 at the Vermilion Regional Airport. Organizers expect more than 20,000 visitors.

Co-chair Jim Anderson said the fourth annual festival will feature 32 hot-air balloons, including three special-shape balloons; tethered balloon rides; a balloon school; and plenty of other family-oriented activities. He also announced that due to the popularity of the tethered rides, which increases every year, Indianapolis-based pilot Tony Sandlin, who offers them, is bringing three balloons for that purpose.

The first year, Sandlin, of Midwest Balloon Rides, brought one balloon, and for the past two years, he brought two. Both baskets are handicapped accessible, allowing a rider to sit in a wheelchair and take

in the scenery through a clear door.

In addition to designing the balloons — which will be used on posters, T-shirts and other promotional materials — the pint-sized ambassadors get to offer their ideas for the popular Kids Zone area.

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JIM ANDERSON,
Balloons Over Vermilion co-chairman

They also get to walk in the Parade of Pilots, which opens the event, and go up in one of Sandlin's balloons.

"By a show of hands ... how many of you would like to go up in a tethered hot-air balloon?" Anderson asked the class, prompting everyone's hand to go up. Kodie and Tyler raised both hands.

On Friday, the class was given their special homework assignment — and new Sharpies. On Monday, Anderson and Jaclyn Vinson, who chairs the Kids Zone, stopped by to see their work.

Eight-year-old Miles Nixon's balloon featured a slice of pepperoni pizza, which Esteppe sketched, he outlined and then colored.

"He's dabbing," Miles said, referring to the dance move where a person — or pizza slice, in this case — drops his head into the crook of a bent arm, while raising the other one in a parallel direction.

"He loves pizza — Casey's," said classmate Owen Gritton, who drew a dark blue Pete the Cat on his balloon.

Though Owen likes to read, he said, "I'm more into math." But he decided Pete would look better on a balloon envelope, soaring through the sky, than math equations.

Anderson stopped to compliment Annabell Wasson on her picture of a girl steering a pirate ship with a rainbow-colored sail, sailing across blue waves.

"Does this person have a name?" he asked, causing the 9-year-old to smile and tell him it was

her. "For heavens sake! I should have recognized you."

In the past two years, Anderson said the organization has given away more than \$40,000 in grants to initiatives throughout the county, including the Kickapoo Rail Trail, Rose Gates' Children's Backpack Program, the Dwelling Place and Schlarman Academy's archery program.

Danville's Northeast Elementary Magnet School, Bismarck Grade School and Judith Giacomma Grade School in Westville each received \$2,500 for being previous host schools.

"When we sat down to organize this event, now over five years ago, we wanted to make sure it was a family event, and our mission statement is, 'It's all about the kids,'" Anderson said, adding the ambassadors help them stay focused on that. "We realize being a kid isn't defined by age.

"I think the spirit of the event is best captured in the eyes of Julius Hegeler," he continued, referring to the event's title sponsor, "when he watches the balloons lift off, the kids walking in the Parade of Pilots and ... how much joy this event brings to Vermilion County."