

NORTHEAST ELEMENTARY MAGNET SCHOOL

Class under the balloon top

Students get a lesson in hot-air aviation

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DANVILLE — It's 8 a.m. Wednesday at Northeast Elementary Magnet School, and balloon school is now in session.

One by one, 14 K-6 classes step outside onto the blacktop and see a colorful, partially inflated hot-air balloon lying on its side.

"It looks like a bounce house," says Magdalen Nardoni, a third-grader in Jessica Alyea's class.

"Do we get to go in there?" asks classmate Jaylyn Esther, whose jaw drops when his teacher answers "yes."

Alyea's pupils are the student ambassadors for the second annual Balloons Over Vermilion Festival, set for July 14-15 at the Vermilion Regional Airport.

While the job came with some extra homework, including helping to design a poster that will be used to market the event, it also came with some perks. A big one: Northeast's own balloon school, put on by Danville pilot Donna Carlton-Vish and her crew.

A pilot since 2001, Carlton-Vish flies Sunny Side Up II, which looks like a bright yellow sunburst surrounded by the colors of the rainbow and stands seven stories tall when fully inflated. On Wednesday, she brought along her first balloon — Sunny Side Up I, now retired — to teach the kids about her passion.

It's a preview of the festival's more in-depth balloon school, set for 2 to 4 p.m. July 15. There, kids of all ages can learn ballooning basics at different stations staffed by Carlton-Vish, other pilots and crew members.

At Northeast, Carlton-Vish and her crew finish the cold-air inflation process. After they secure the balloon, students file inside.

"Did you think we would all fit in here?" Carlton-Vish asks, after all 310 students, 36 teachers and staffers and several parents are seated comfortably inside the envelope.

She starts off with a brief history of hot-air ballooning, including the first manned flight that took place in France on Nov. 21, 1783. Next, she points out the main components of the aircraft.



Noelle McGee/The News-Gazette

Northeast Elementary Magnet School students and staff gather Wednesday inside the envelope of a hot-air balloon piloted by Donna Carlton-Vish.

"This is the envelope," Carlton-Vish says, referring to their surrounding.

"It's made out of nylon. Go ahead; touch it," she urges, prompting students to reach down and run their hands over the material.

She also points out the wicker basket that carries the pilot and passengers and the burner system.

"That burner is as hot as several furnaces you have in your house," Carlton-Vish says, explaining that it produces the hot air that makes the balloon rise. She lowers the balloon by opening a hole in the envelope to let the hot air escape.

Students look surprised when Carlton-Vish tells them she can't steer the balloon.

"You have to use the wind," she says, explaining that the wind direction changes at different altitudes. So she adjusts her altitude depending on which way the wind is going.

"I never know where it will land," she continues, adding that her crew — which follows the balloon in a chase vehicle — must keep up to help with the landing.

Then Carlton-Vish goes over some important safety tips.

"Never, ever get in front of a moving basket," she cautions. "That basket will mow you over."

"And if you ever take a ride, it's always important to stay in the basket until the pilot tells you it's OK to get out," she says, explaining that if the balloon is still fully inflated, it could "shoot up again" and someone trying to dismount could fall out and get hurt.

Before students are dismissed and Alyea's class helps pack up the balloon, Carlton-Vish has one more question: Would any of you like to become a pilot?

Many kids raise their hand.

She holds up a thick binder. She tells them they can as long as they're willing to study, log at least 10 hours of flight time and pass written and flight tests, all of which she had to do to earn her pilot's license.

"It doesn't matter if you're a girl or a guy, everybody can be a balloon pilot," Carlton-Vish says. "It just takes study and a desire to do what we do."