

PILOTS A TIGHTLY KNIT COMMUNITY

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DANVILLE – After a year in the works, the local ballooning community is really looking forward to another exciting weekend.

“Bunch of really talented, hard-working people behind the scenes putting this together,” said Joe Vincent, this year’s balloonmeister.

He said he’s flown at many different locations across the Midwest for around 15-17 years, but this county offers a unique setting for a balloon flight.



Joe Vincent

“To be quiet honest, Vermilion County is the most phenomenal place to fly,” he said. Comparing both Champaign and Vermilion counties, he said the former only has corn and soybeans to fly over.

“Here we’ve got rivers, parks, beautiful views and great places to contour fly,” he added.

Originally from Iowa, Vincent came to Danville in 1996 and was introduced to two local pilots, Hank Norris and Dean Carlton. He later earned his license in 1997. Vincent continued to fly up until 2013, when he semi-retired from ballooning. “Arthritis got the best of me,” he said, adding he’s still very close to the sport and involved with the local ballooning community.

Vincent said they’re a tightly knit and normally convenes after a flight.

“Everyone gets together, you share your experiences and you really get to learn from others,” he said.

However, now that cameras and smartphones are everywhere these days, he said pilots really have to be aware of what they’re doing in a balloon. Flying in areas such as Vermilion County, he said at least one person is likely taking a photo or a video at any time.

“Every time you land, people think you’re crashing,” Vincent said. “Just the name of the deal.”

He chalks that up to people who get excited when up close to a balloon. Sometimes, he said pilots may need to perform a rip-out landing. That’s when winds are more of a risk, and the basket may slide across the ground or even onto its side, as the top is pulled out to let the envelope die

See **COMMUNITY** | 4A

COMMUNITY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

down.

As balloonmeister, Vincent is responsible for getting the FAA permit, which approves the minimum altitude they can fly at. He said balloons are under the same altitude restrictions as a regular airplane, and they're not supposed to fly close to the ground.

His work initially starts off by personally inviting pilots

and getting a full field of them on board. When searching for pilots, he said, first, they make sure they're safe, and second, that they'll respect local land owners and the event sponsors.

If an event gets too big and involves a lot of money, he said, they're concerned about crews who might come in to fly "for a different reason."

For this year he said, "We've got a good group of pilots." During his 15 years of flying, he said he had the same sponsors who turned into friends,

adding he saw kids fly up, grow up, then fly their own kids and grand kids.

Vincent admitted there's a lot of pressure attached to his role, as he makes the final call on whether they can fly or not. "We have 10,000 people expecting and wanting to see balloons fly," he said, "but we've got to be safe, got restrictions set upon us, and parameters we can fly in.

"Some of it's by the seats of our pants."

Although ballooning is getting to be an older sport, Vin-

cent said it's good to see young people that have learned to fly and are flying in our area now. So for all the work and effort he's put into to the event, Vincent feels this is his way of giving back.

"It's just not me," he added. "There are huge committees that work incredibly hard to make this happen. A lot of people are doing the set up and getting every minor detail right.

"They physically work their tails off."