

**BALLOONS OVER VERMILION**

# One pilot offering a unique ride

## Glass-door gondola to give lift to special-needs kids, teen in wheelchair

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DANVILLE — Tony Sandlin has been piloting hot air balloons for 14 years, but flying at the inaugural Balloons Over Vermilion will mark a first for him.

Sandlin will be taking a rider who uses a wheelchair on a flight at the event.

“I think it’s going to be great,” said Sandlin, who has a special basket with a glass door that not only makes it wheelchair accessible but also allows a person to sit down during a flight and still see through and below the basket.

That’s not possible with regular “doorless” gondolas.

Sandlin, of Indianapolis, turned his hobby of hot air ballooning into a business, Midwest Balloon Rides, and in April got the special glass-door basket that’s accessible to anyone who uses a wheelchair, can’t maneuver into a regular basket or can’t stand for an entire flight.

Sandlin said his company has given rides in the basket to people who can’t maneuver into a regular one easily, including a woman celebrating her 90th birthday.

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Photo provided

Hot air balloon pilot Tony Sandlin, right, of Indianapolis and his crew show off his glass-door gondola that’s wheelchair-accessible and will be used to give rides to special-needs kids and others this weekend at Balloons Over Vermilion.

# BALLOONS

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But Saturday morning in Danville, he's scheduled for his maiden voyage with a rider who's disabled. The teenager's flight is being sponsored by local businessman Richard Woodard.

Also, 50 area special-needs children selected by Danville AMBUCS will get free tethered rides thanks to an anonymous donor.

Pat O'Shaughnessy, Balloons Over Vermilion co-chair, said organizers are "excited to be able to share the up-close, interactive excitement of hot air balloons with everyone and we are thrilled to add this to our event activities."

Sandlin said the special basket, which he can fly with two different balloon envelopes, is one of only a handful in the nation and the only one in the Midwest, that's accessible to all people. He decided to get it because he gets requests to fly people who need an accessible gondola. He's already getting requests for rides from as far as Chicago and Cincinnati.

At 6:30 on Friday night and Saturday night during Balloons Over Vermilion, Sandlin will be offering, weather permitting, tethered rides in the accessible balloon, which means it is connected by a tether to the ground as it goes up about 80 feet and comes back down. He said anyone, even those who don't need an accessible basket, can do a tethered ride, and it's a great way for people thinking about an actual ride to experience leaving the ground. Rides are \$15 for adults and \$10 for children.

"It's a great tease," he said, explaining that 80 feet doesn't sound high, but almost everyone remarks when they get up there that "it's higher than it looks."

The basket is also larger than most,

## Look, up in the sky!

The scoop on Balloons Over Vermilion, a two-day festival featuring 30 hot air balloons at Vermilion Regional Airport:

### TODAY

Splash and Dash hosted by the Danville Boat Club at 5 p.m.

### FRIDAY

Grounds open 3 to 11 p.m., with flights set for 6:30 p.m. at the airport.

### SATURDAY

Grounds open 6 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. with balloon flights scheduled for 6 a.m. from various points around Danville and 7 p.m. on airport grounds.

to accommodate a wheelchair and several other people, which means, Sandlin explained, that the balloon, or envelope, is also bigger than most to get the heavier basket off the ground.

The red, white and blue "Glory Be" balloon that he plans to use with the basket this weekend is 120,000 cubic feet, compared to most of the 30 other hot air balloons that will be at the festival this weekend, which are 90,000 to 105,000 cubic feet.

Joining Sandlin is a lineup of pilots mostly from the Midwest, including a handful from Danville, who were instrumental in organizing the event, and a handful from Champaign County, too, including Max Mitchell and Betsy Kleiss, both of Champaign, Debra Griest of Urbana and David and Kathy Reineke of Mahomet.

Sandlin has been good friends with Danville-area pilots and is thrilled that they're getting this event off the ground after talking about it for years. Sandlin said he really enjoys giving people rides in his balloons.

"It's amazing how much people thank me for doing something they're paying me to do," he said.