

BALLOONS OVER VERMILION

Festival 'an event of the generations'

Crowd's wait rewarded with evening liftoff

By TRACY CRANE

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DANVILLE — Janet Wustholz and her 9-year-old granddaughter had been planning all week to take a tethered hot air balloon ride at the Balloons Over Vermilion festival.

As the pilots waited for the wind to die down Friday night — their balloons spread across the grounds at Vermilion Regional Airport and the growing crowd eagerly anticipating whether they would go or just glow — Wustholz, of Danville, and her granddaughter nearly left.

As soon as they spotted the first balloons lifting off, they quickly changed their minds and headed for the spot where one of the pilots was offering tethered rides.

"We were the first in line. I loved it," said Wustholz's granddaughter, Sarah Leger, of Danville, just after touching down and emerging from the gondola.

Wustholz said neither of them had ever been in a hot air balloon before, and the tethered ride, which lifts about 80 feet off the ground while lines keep the balloon from drifting away, was "awesome."

"Oh, I loved it," Wustholz said.

Although the winds delayed the main event — hot air balloons — on Friday night, the first day of the inaugural Balloons Over Vermilion, the large crowd finally got to see what they came for — balloons lift off and float away, although the entire field of about 30 balloons did not brave the gusty evening.

Those who stayed behind set up for a balloon glow — firing their burners and lighting up their balloons as the sun went below the horizon.

Earlier in the day, the winds made any liftoff

questionable.

The pilots began monitoring the weather around 10 a.m. Friday after the 10 balloons that flew earlier in the morning landed, said Ryan Carlton, the main weather monitor.

"We've paid the most attention to the wind speed," said Carlton, who co-owns and co-pilots "Hello Sweetie," flown by Brock Gale during the event.

"We knew that it was going to be right on the edge," he continued. "We're putting safety before everything else."

Fifteen minutes after the scheduled 6:30 p.m. balloon fly-out time, the ground wind speed clocked in at 11 miles per hour, which made Carlton uncomfortable.

Before a few thousand hopeful spectators, pilots went ahead and set up in the event the gusts would die down. Then around 7:20 p.m., an orange safety vehicle with a flashing red light drove across the field, indicating pilots could start the inflation process and take off.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" cried Julius W. Hegeler II, the title sponsor of the event, as he watched the first balloon — "Knot Over," flown by Al Reush of Macomb — rise up into the sky.

"I haven't seen a balloon take off in more than 15 years," said Hegeler, who was watching the mass launch with his companion Lois Wise and friends Frank and Lynn Brunacci. "I didn't expect them to take off tonight. This is great."

The only thing better, Hegeler said: seeing the smiles on spectators' faces and hearing their squeals of excitement.

"It's a great feeling," he said. "We just hope they're just enjoying it as much as we enjoy giving it."

Some of those squeals were from 11-year-old Theodore Evans, one of about 50 special-needs children who received a ticket for a free tethered ride.

His mom, Lynette Evans of Tilton, waited just an hour before leaving home Friday night to tell him where they were going, because she knew his excitement would boil over. And it did when the balloons began inflating, and continued right up until they got in line for their tethered flight after 8 p.m. She said as soon as they parked their truck on the grounds around 5 p.m., her son darted out of the truck with excitement, asking 20 questions on the way.

"They've just been jittery with joy," Lynette Evans said of her son and her daughter, Anna Evans, 8, who was also going up in the balloon with them. "I was a little worried with the wind delay, but it's pure delight now. It's worth the wait, you know."

Lynette Evans said she always enjoyed the Balloon Classic years ago.

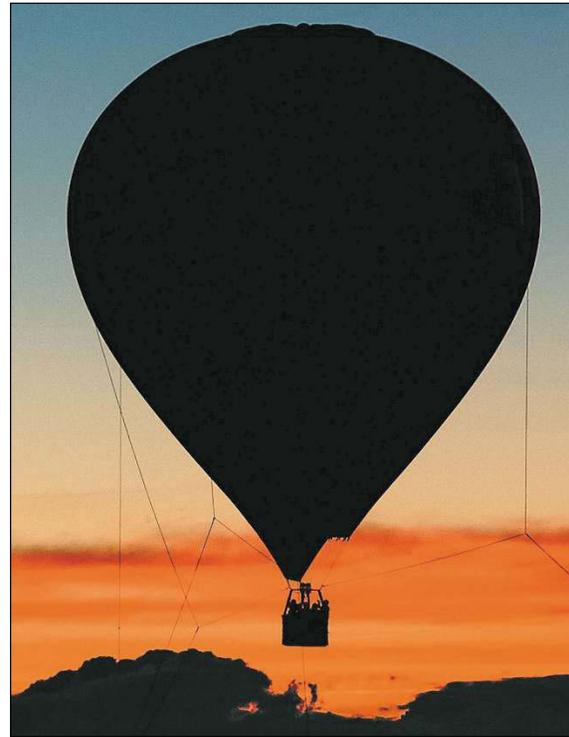
"It's an event of the generations, and it just feels so good to see the balloons take off. The vibrant colors. It's inspirational," she said.

Jim Anderson, co-chair of the event with Pat O'Shaughnessy, smiled as he watched the crowd grow, from his perch not far from the main gate.

"I couldn't be happier," he said of the turnout, adding that shuttle activity bringing people to the airport was reportedly brisk.

"When we put this together, we anticipated 15,000," said Anderson, who expected a second wave of people would come to hear state Rep. Chad Hays' Boat Drink Caucus and '90s Daughter take the stage. "I wouldn't be surprised if we surpass that."

"It's just a wonderful feeling to see everyone coming out and having so much fun," Anderson continued, adding this is only the first year of the new ballooning event. "We're looking forward to not only launching balloons but also a new generation of balloon enthusiasts."



Tethered rides rise against the sunset Friday as hot air balloons light up the night during the balloon glow at the Vermilion County Airport in Danville. Balloons Over Vermilion continues through Sunday night, with gates opening today at 1 p.m. and closing at 11:30 p.m.

Robin Scholz/
The News-Gazette

For more of Robin Scholz's photos, check out our photo gallery at news-gazette.com.



More than a lot of hot air

By NOELLE MCGEE

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DANVILLE — They may be the stars of the show, but there's a lot more than hot air balloons at Vermilion County's newest balloon event.

"There's something for everyone," said Jim Anderson, co-chairman of the Balloons Over Vermilion festival, which continues today.

While he said the event is "all about the kids," he added, "This weekend will put a twinkle in everyone's eye regardless of their age."

Gates open at 1 p.m. today and close at 11:30 p.m., with the grounds closing at 12:30 a.m. Sunday.

Balloons are scheduled to fly around Danville at 6 this morning, weather permitting.

Some of the other activities today:

— The Kids' Zone, 1 to 10 p.m. Activities include a video-game trailer, corn-hole, Joyful Bubbles, face-painting, sidewalk chalk, reptile show from Danville Area Community Col-

lege, free movies from the city of Danville, a Danville Public Library area, pop-up musical performances, "Minute To Win It"-style games, storytime with Disney princesses, a Civil War photo booth and balloon animals.

— The Illiana Antique Car Show, 1 to 5:30 p.m. "Initially, they told us they wanted to bring 150 cars," Anderson said. "They called back and asked us if there was room for 300."

— The Balloon School for Kids, 2 to 3:30 p.m. Children of all ages can rotate through seven different stations to get the answer to these questions and others: What makes a balloon fly? How is the balloon and basket built? How do you become a pilot?

In addition, students can walk inside the envelope of a cold-inflated balloon, see and feel a balloon up close, and see all of the equipment pilots and crew members use to inflate and fly. No hot air or fire will be used during any of the demonstrations.

— Tethered balloon rides, 6:30 to 10 p.m. They

are \$15 for adults and \$10 for children 10 and younger. (Youths under 17 must be signed up by an adult.) Tethered balloons, which are secured to the ground by heavy vehicles and strong ropes, can take between four and eight people up to between 50 to 100 feet. The trips last about five minutes — long enough to get a bird's-eye view of the festival grounds. The basket can accommodate a person in a wheelchair and three other people at the same time. The basket has a door with a clear, front panel, allowing someone in a seated position or small children a great view.

— Live music from a variety of bands, starting at 1 p.m. The line-up: El Guapo, 1 p.m.; Bob Schifo Band, 3 p.m.; Katapult, 4:45 p.m.; and My Brother's Keeper, 6:45 and 9 p.m. The entertainment ends with a Willard Cratchelow reunion at 10:15 p.m. Everyone who was part of the legendary band will get together to share their love of music, the fans and late "comrade" Joe Martin.