

# Balloons over Vermilion putting kids to work

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DANVILLE — When Jessica Alyea's students at Northeast Elementary Magnet School in Danville learned they would be getting more homework this year, they cheered.

That's because the "homework" consists of helping to design the Kids Zone at this year's Balloons Over Vermilion Festival, designing a mural that kids can color and other duties that come with serving as the student ambassadors for the hot-air balloon event.

"They were really excited," said Pat O'Shaughnessy, who, along with Jim Anderson, is co-chairing the event a second year. "We told them it's going to be some work, but fun work. ... They jumped in and gave us their ideas."

Officials announced Wednesday the festival will return to the Vermilion Regional Airport on July 14 and 15, bringing with it more hot-air balloons, food vendors and family-friendly activities.

Last year's much-anticipated event — the first local balloon festival since the Balloon Classic ended 15 years prior — featured 30 balloons and two special-shaped balloons. They were on display for the 20,000 or so spectators during mass launches, fly-ins and evening balloon glows.

"This year, there will be at least one more flying balloon," O'Shaughnessy said, pointing out that local pilots Ryan Carlton and Brock Gale, who co-owned and co-piloted "Hello, Sweetie!" each have their own now. "We certainly want them involved."



**Photo by: Provided**

Northeast Elementary Magnet School teacher Jessica Alyea watches as Pat O'Shaughnessy, co-chairman of the Balloons Over Vermilion hot-air balloon festival, tells her third-graders about their duties as the student ambassadors to this year's event. This year's festival is set for July 14 and 15 at the Vermilion Regional Airport north of Danville.

He added special-shaped balloons Al Fonz (piloted by Max Mitchell of Champaign) and Peg Leg Pete (piloted by David Reineke of Mahomet) are expected to return.

"If we can find the right fit, we might have another one or two of those," he said.

New this year: Two performances by the Jesse White Tumbling Team on July 15. Founded by the Illinois secretary of state and Zach Mitchell, the team consists of youth acrobats who must maintain certain academic standards in order to qualify and be a part of the high-flying troupe.

"Their youth-oriented program is a great fit for our event," Anderson said of the team, which gives more than 1,500 performances a year, has been featured in several movies and frequently perform during half-time shows for the NBA, NFL and MLB games.

In addition, people can take (paid) rides on a Bell 47 helicopter similar to the one seen in "MASH."

"Flying in a Bell 47 means you can see just about everything around you," said Jaime Samuell, who operates Sierra Aeronautics and added passenger safety is always his top priority.

Back by popular demand: tethered hot-air balloon rides.

Last year, Indianapolis pilot Tony Sandlin took people of all ages up in his balloon, "Glory Be," which has a handicapped-accessible gondola and can accommodate a person in a wheelchair.

"This year, he's bringing two," O'Shaughnessy said.

And this year, O'Shaughnessy added, people will be able to buy tickets for one of the tethered balloons ahead of time. Organizers are developing a signage system to number rides and show the what ride is flying, so that people who purchased them can enjoy other activities while they're waiting.

In addition, O'Shaughnessy said there will be at least 35 food vendors — 16 more than last year. They will be placed around the event and not block the Kids Zone.

"We're making some adjustments that will make it even more user-friendly and make it even bigger and better," O'Shaughnessy said.

He added that Alyea's third-graders will play a big role in that in the coming months.

After learning they were the student ambassadors earlier this month, they learned some ballooning basics from local pilots Dean Carlton and Larry Owen, who also treated them to trading cards of their

balloons. They also started brainstorming ideas — including more bounce houses for the Kids Zone and shorter lines for the tethered balloon rides.

"We thought these kids should be on our steering committee," O'Shaughnessy said with a laugh. "They were way ahead of us."

Later this year, Kids Zone chairwomen Jaclyn Vinson and Samantha McCoy will return to their classroom to help students work on a design for a giant mural that kids can color during the two-day festival and posters that will be used to market the event. After the event, the mural would be given to Northeast to be put on display.

Pilots will also put on a balloon school for all Northeast students.

"They're a neat group, and we look forward to having them help us," O'Shaughnessy said. "It keeps us grounded in our mission, which is 'it's all about the kids.'"