

Reporter describes trip in a hot air balloon

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MT. VERNON — Hot air balloons are awesome. Quite literally, they inspire awe.

I've wanted to ride in a hot air balloon ever since Lucky Charms cereal added hot air balloons to their colorful selection of marshmallows in my breakfast.

When I found out that Jennifer and David Witzel were going to let me fly in their hot air balloon "Nothin' But a Breeze," I kept my composure, but was ecstatic on the inside.

I wouldn't say that I came into the experience not knowing what to expect. I had previously covered Fall Fest Board of Directors meetings and spoken with Jennifer Witzel about hot air balloons on several occasions.

I knew that ballooning is a culture, a culture comprised of dedicated individuals who spend significant quantities of time and money partaking in an activity that is much more than a hobby.

I was also told that ballooning is an absolute team effort; however, I had no idea how much ballooning is about community. Being told information doesn't compare to learning by experience.

I learned many things as I careened into the air with pilot Kevin Witzel.

Spiderwebs can actually fly into the air an upwards of 200 feet, and the wind blowing through the basket of the balloon at 500 feet was very calm, not the loud and blustery experience I had been anticipating.

The most important thing I realized during the experience was that hot air balloons are all about community.

"That's what I love about ballooning," Kevin Witzel said, "you can't do it alone."

A dedicated group of crew members is required to set up the balloon, aid in the take-off, follow the flight,

help during the landing and pack up the balloon after the flight.

The crew members of "Nothin' But A Breeze" showed that they were more than just friends as they set to assembling the balloon like clockwork before my eyes.

GUEST COMMENTARY

Each individual performed their required role with the intuition and air of camaraderie that comes only from doing a task many times with a group of people you've grown to love.

Beyond the close-knit group of crew members and pilots, balloons affect members of the community in a much larger way.

The design of hot air balloons themselves are exclusively for the community of gazers who watch the majestic shape float across the sky.

After riding in a hot air balloon, I can confidently say that the balloon could be colored mud brown and it wouldn't tarnish the experience of riding in a balloon in the least.

During my flight, several families would stand in their yard and greet us as we sailed over their home. One father even ran back into his house shouting for his kids to come and see the beautiful object in the sky.

Kevin Witzel greeted everyone with a friendly hello and asked them how they were. Despite the incredible height difference, pilots are still able to be cordial with passersby.

One citizen was already snapping pictures of us from her yard by the time I could see her, only halting the photo shoot to briefly waive.

The flight crew always follows the balloon in vehicles, but trucks and cars of local citizens would stop on the

road to gaze or slowly follow us, honking their horns in support and appreciation.

I was incredibly amazed at how many people outside

of the balloon crew could be influenced during a 30-minute balloon flight over the countryside.

The culminating moment of clarity occurred for me when I saw three teenage boys run a couple miles to scope out the balloon as it landed. Despite being winded, they were full of questions and enthusiasm about what they considered to be an extraordinary event.

Kevin Witzel allowed the teenagers to handle the balloon and help with the folding. After they got their fill of balloon excitement they left, and I found myself pondering how amazing hot air balloons truly are.

The flight I was just on was exhilarating, but what really struck a cord with me was the realization that hot air balloons are technological wonders that can inspire the imagination of anyone who sees them.

Planes and helicopters are more efficient for travel, and they are certainly cool. Old military planes also have a historical prestige that generates a lot of interest; however, I would hold that no other aircraft on earth can tickle the imagination like a hot air balloon can.

As Fall Fest closes in and the Friday balloon glow approaches, I look forward to seeing the imaginative wonder on the faces of children and adults alike.

For outdated bags of hot air, hot air balloons sure are awesome.



Greg Peterson