

Bridging the gap

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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Introducing a new generation into the world of ballooning

According to the Balloon Federation of America, about 80% of balloon pilots will age out of the sport in the next 10 to 20 years. In order for ballooning to continue as a sport and pastime, the younger generations will need to become more involved.

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And that's exactly what pilots like Marissa Myers are doing.

Myers is the stepdaughter of Peter Procopio, the founder of the Red Rock Balloon Rally.

In an interview with the *Sun*, Myers explained that it was actually her mom Colleen Marchand who was interested in ballooning. She started flying in the early '80s, and she ended up teaching Meyers' father. When the couple divorced, Marchand went on to find a pilot to marry in Procopio.

With all that family history, Myers said she was always interested in ballooning. However, she didn't get her ballooning license at the age of 16. Instead, she went on to give birth to her three children.

After she gave birth to her children, she went on to become a nurse. It was only recently, at the age of 35, that she decided to pursue ballooning as a full-time profession. She now owns Pagosa Adventure, a company that helps people take hot air balloon rides and rafting experiences down the San Juan River in Pagosa Springs, Colo.

Along with Pagosa Adventure, Myers is also working with a group that is going to offer scholarships to women and young people to help them get their balloon pilot licenses. The group is also going to be giving presentations at schools around Colorado and New Mexico.

"The demonstrations are just to get the kids exposed to [ballooning] a little bit, get them understanding the science, and maybe spark an interest," Myers said.

The Balloon Federation of America is also working on getting young people involved in the sport. The organization offers a variety of summer camps where kids ages 13-17 learn the basics of ballooning; including safety, flight, and pilot decision-making skills.

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While Myers and others are trying to teach people about hot air ballooning, there are multiple reasons why someone may not be able to get into the hobby. One of those reasons is the price.

A brand-new balloon can cost up to \$50,000. A used balloon can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$15,000, although that doesn't include the trailer and truck needed to haul it.

Myers suggested that if someone is interested in ballooning and doesn't want to buy their own balloon, they should join a crew.

"I just encourage people to come out and get involved. Find a balloon crew that you can be involved with," Myers said.

A balloon crew is a group of people that helps the pilot get the balloon set up and ready to fly. The average hot air balloon weighs about 300 pounds, so getting people to help is essential.

Myers said that once someone has found a crew, a pilot is usually pretty willing to help train them. She said people will often trade crew hours for instructional hours.

Ballooning isn't all fun and games though. Myers said one of the most difficult things about flying a hot air balloon these days is figuring out where to land it.

"A lot of people have become very privatized where they don't want you landing on their land, so our landing options are becoming fewer and fewer with the explosion of growth, especially in Pagosa and Gallup," Myers explained.

In almost the same breath though, Myers did express her appreciation for landowners who do let hot air balloons land on their property.

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“We are so appreciative of all the landowners, that’s just one of the difficulties we are facing.”

ON THE OLDER SIDE OF THINGS

Tom Gough has been flying his own balloon since the early ‘80s.

Unlike Myers, he did not grow up with balloons. His first experience with a balloon happened when he was driving down a road in Nebraska one Friday in 1971.

He saw a balloon heading toward the ground, and he decided to follow it. He got off the interstate and ran out to where it landed.

That’s when he met Malcolm Forbes, publisher of *Forbes* magazine, and helped him pack up his balloon.

After that, he went back to work, but his life was never the same. He’d caught the hot air balloon bug.

He told his colleagues at work about his experience, and a woman told him that her son actually bought a balloon recently, and he couldn’t find anyone help him with it. The next Saturday Gough was out in a field in Nebraska in the early morning.

“It was magic because there were about 10 balloons in this park and ground fog up to about your waist everywhere,” Gough said about his first experience as a crew member for a pilot.

He said his life was changed forever after that chance encounter, and if he hadn’t been driving down that Nebraska interstate at that time, he would’ve continued on with his life “in a fog.”

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Since that fateful day, Gough has traveled all over the world with balloons. He's been all over Europe, and to almost every province in Canada.

Despite everywhere he's been, Gough said Gallup is his favorite place to fly.

"I would rather fly in Gallup than any place I can think of. Part of that is the terrain, and the other part, and probably more importantly, it's the people," Gough said. "If the people weren't nice or fun to be around, you wouldn't think it was a great place to fly, you wouldn't want to come back."

Gough is 80 years old, and he saw that first balloon when he was 40 years old. He said this year's Red Rock Balloon Rally would be his last time as a pilot, although he still plans to crew for friends when he gets the chance.

"I wouldn't quit [if I had a choice]," Gough said. "The problem is if you don't fly very often, you're not sufficient. Back 20 years ago I used to fly 200 days a year. Now I'd be lucky if I flew 20."

Gough is still able to reflect back on all the amazing experiences he's had.

One of the more memorable flights happened when he took one of his friend's acquaintance out for a ride. Gough said the man didn't talk much during the flight, but he did ask some questions about the balloon and thanked him for the ride.

Later that day, Gough's friend asked him if he knew who he'd had in his balloon. Gough replied by saying "yeah, he's your friend Neil." Gough's friend laughed, and said, "and his last name is Armstrong."

Gough said Neil Armstrong, yes, the astronaut who was the first person to walk on the moon, was very polite, and he got his autograph later that night.

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Besides Armstrong, Gough has flown two other astronauts in his balloon and a couple of Russian cosmonauts.

After reflecting on his years as a pilot, Gough discussed the future of ballooning. He said the Baby Boomer generation needs to step up if the sport is going to continue.

“Any time the older generation sees someone who expresses an interest, they need to nurture that and support that,” Gough said. “And we do that all the time.”

Gough agrees with Myers about finding a crew to learn about ballooning. He said that experience can teach someone everything they need to know, from how to put the balloon away to what everything is called.

“Quite frankly I think it’s just as much fun to crew as it is to fly,” Gough said.

He also suggested looking up the Balloon Federation of America. They have a list of pilots from every state.

He encourages young people to go out and try to learn as much as they can.

“I would hope that there are young people out there who would desire to explore an area of aviation that most people don’t ever get an opportunity to experience,” Gough said.

Most important of all though, Gough said, is the people you meet while ballooning. He calls his friends his “Balloon family.”

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“Your balloon family is as important to you as your own family because you share a common bond and you share a common interest and the passion,” Gough said.

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