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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

Up, up and away: A trip across Albany in a hot air balloon

Maddie Pfeifer

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Chris Whitfield has been balloonmeister of the Northwest Art & Air festival since 2011.

Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

If you live in the mid-Willamette Valley, you've probably seen a hot air balloon or two fly high in the sky. With the annual Northwest Art & Air Festival taking place Friday, Aug. 26 through Sunday, Aug. 28, your chances of seeing man's first aircraft is even higher.

I had the excellent opportunity to go up into the air Thursday morning, Aug. 25. Starting work at 5 a.m. isn't my ideal schedule, but the trip made it well worth the early morning effort.

With photographer Kylie Graham by my side, we ascended into the heavens — which was fitting considering our balloon was named Heaven Bound.



A hot air balloon ride over Albany and Jefferson on Thursday, August 25.

Balloonmeister Chris Whitfield was our pilot for the morning. In his experimental, home-built craft that took three months to construct, we left from Timber Linn Memorial Park and glided all the way to Jefferson.

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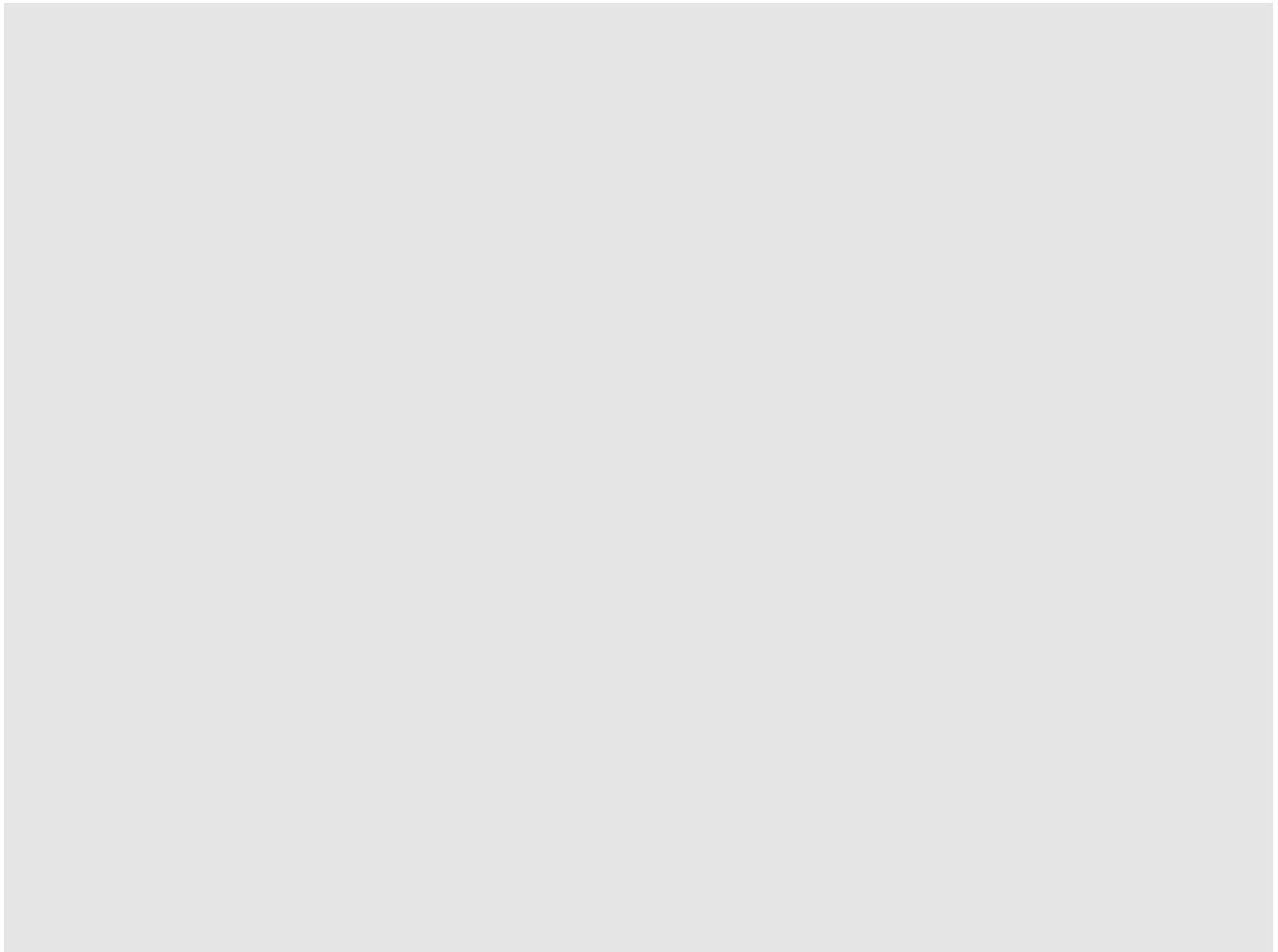
Whitfield has held the title of balloonmeister since 2011. He has flown in the event year after year, always appreciating the chance to share his passion with others.

“This Albany event is the biggest in Oregon, and we get a lot of pilots from different states,” he said. “Albany is an easy and fun place to fly with wide open fields. The best part of this event is seeing all the pilots you only see once a year.”

Ready for take off

I’ve never been in a hot air balloon, but lucky for me, I got the full experience. I was put to work and helped set up the aircraft prior to takeoff. The hard work made stepping into the basket all the more sweet. I was even provided a stool to help me climb in (I’m not known for my height).

The sun was rising, and we took in the views of Albany. Whitfield said the wind flow direction was not typical for the area, so we took a different route than usual.



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The ride was surprisingly smooth as we sailed into the sky. We skimmed across water and brushed over pine trees. I felt like a celebrity as I waved to the spectators below.

Team players

Our crew followed us by car, tracking the balloon through the sky so they could meet us where we land. These hot air balloon enthusiasts are not only knowledgeable but passionate too. They kind of have to be to wake up early, put in some heavy lifting and still not reap the rewards of being in the sky. Instead, they help with set up and clean up.

Crew Chief Penny Mehlhorn said the ballooning community in Albany is great. She and the rest of the crew are grateful for the farmers who let pilots land in their fields.

It's not an easy job, but the crew members said they love it. Many of them were hooked after just one hot air balloon experience.

"When people show up every year, you see what it means to the community," Whitfield said. "It's the signature event of the end of summer. People tell me they love seeing balloons over their house."

The descent

After an hour in the sky, it was time to find a place to land. There is something a little anxiety-inducing about being mostly dependent on the wind, but neither the wind nor our pilot led us astray.

We braced for impact and landed in a field somewhere in the Jefferson area. I was surprised and impressed by how far we had trekked.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but the experience of floating through the air was special. Of course, there are scary moments when the thought crosses your mind that you could easily fall out of the basket. But I was pleasantly surprised by how safe I felt.

First flight

Whitfield and the crew were excited to know it was our first time in a hot air balloon. After returning to the park where we started, we received official certificates recognizing our first flight.

Following a quick history lesson, Whitfield said “The Balloonist’s Prayer” and we all toasted to the experience.

Not bad for a Thursday at work.

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