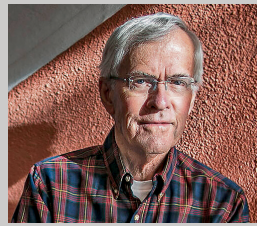




### Art with a purpose

Go Vote Roe exhibit hopes to inspire voters to protect abortion rights in November. **LOCAL & REGION, C-1**



Retired senator has new book lamenting D.C. 'Breakdown'  
**LOCAL & REGION, C-1**



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### 50TH ALBUQUERQUE BALLOON FIESTA

# FLOATING OFF INTO THE SUNSET

Number of pilots electing to retire after milestone year has some worried about future



**ABOVE:** Veteran balloonist Ron Curry, center, stands up the KQOB-AM Radio balloon Friday as thousands gather at Balloon Fiesta Park in Albuquerque to watch the morning mass ascension. Curry, like many of his contemporaries, plans to retire from ballooning after this year's 50th anniversary fiesta.

**TOP:** Wearing his 'Balloon Boy Jacket,' Bryce Risley, 34, tests out the controls on his remote control balloon Friday. Risley, who's working on a book called *The Albuquerque Balloonist*, says many of the old patches on his jacket came from veteran balloon pilots. PHOTOS BY JIM WEBER/THE NEW MEXICAN

By Matt Dahlseid  
mdahlseid@sfnewmexican.com

### ALBUQUERQUE

**B**ryce Risley is putting everything he has into documenting and preserving the world-famous culture of Albuquerque ballooning that captivated him as a child.

Risley holds a double master's degree in marine science, but since returning to his home state after graduate school, he's switched his obsession from creatures that live in the water to humans who feel at

home in the air.

The 34-year-old balloonist, photographer and social scientist is several months and 60-plus interviews into compiling what he says will be the most comprehensive ethnography of the local ballooning scene ever produced. His goal is to speak to and photograph more than 250 people who make up the fabric of the ballooning community for a book called *The Albuquerque Balloonist*.

Initial work on what he expects to be a multi-year project has opened Risley's eyes to an aging community facing challenges on multiple fronts

that have him concerned for the future of ballooning in the city.

"We're losing ballooning very quickly — quicker than pretty much anybody has ever articulated in the media or on a large public platform," said Risley, who joined his first crew while attending the University of New Mexico.

"There's presently a large cohort, a very large cohort, of balloonists who are going to retire after the 50th Fiesta."

It's difficult to gauge the number of balloonists who will call it quits when this year's Albuquerque International

Balloon Fiesta ends Sunday, but Risley said he's learned dozens plan to make the milestone event their last hurrah.

Many others likely won't be far behind, he said.

The same people who entered into the novel sport during the early days of Albuquerque ballooning in the 1970s and 1980s remain a dominant fixture today. Risley said their departure will leave a hole he believes will soon become more noticeable.

"It's not a secret that it's a very

*Please see story on Page A-6*

### GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

# The viral campaign: Ronchetti takes hits in memes

Messages targeting gov. get less social media attention

By Daniel J. Chacón  
dchacon@sfnewmexican.com

It's not just green chile New Mexicans are roasting this fall.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Mark Ronchetti is also on the burner — the subject of dozens of memes across social media seeking to demonstrate he isn't a true New Mexican.

Among the memes floating around on the internet:

"Mark Ronchetti thinks Al Hurricane is a storm in Florida."

"Mark Ronchetti calls the cops on the tamale lady."

"Mark Ronchetti warms up his tortillas in the microwave."

The memes coincided with a slew of tweets with a "Bad for New Mexico" tagline that trended with "Mark Ronchetti" on Twitter last week in New Mexico. Some of the tweets included a meme — in this case, a picture of Ronchetti with a blank stare — while others were just standalone text.

Among the most popular tweets:

"Mark Ronchetti wants to ban lowriders. Bad for the homies. Bad for New Mexico."

"Mark Ronchetti doesn't think La Llorona is real. Bad for ghosts. Bad for New Mexico."

"Mark Ronchetti calls the Balloon Fiesta the 'Balloon Festival.' Bad for balloons. Bad for New Mexico."

A few Ronchetti supporters have tried to counter the attacks by creating memes and tweets unflattering to Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, who is facing a formidable challenge in the Nov. 8 midterm election from the former longtime TV weatherman.

But their efforts fell flat and didn't receive even a tiny fraction of the social media traction the anti-Ronchetti memes and tweets did.

Jessica Feezell, a political science professor at the University of New Mexico, called the authenticity of the social

*Please see story on Page A-4*

### Tapping into science

Brewers are partnering with researchers at Los Alamos National Lab who want to use sound waves to improve fermentation. **PAGE C-1**

## Pasapick

pasatiempomagazine.com

### 'Save the Bees'

Duchess Dale directs a staged reading of Sen. Bill O'Neill's play about the difficulties legislators face when trying to work across the aisle; 2-4 p.m.; Santa Fe Preparatory School Theater, 1101 Camino de la Cruz Blanca; no charge. Register to attend via Zoom at nmhumanities.org/nmlistens.

**More events Fridays in Pasatiempo**



### Today

Scattered storms  
High 59,  
low 44.

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### Obituaries

**Lydia Armenta-Rivera**, Sept. 23  
**Tommy David Chavez**, Sept. 30  
**Andrea Chavez Deleon**, Aug. 16

**Jadon Gabriel Gonzales**, Sept. 22  
**Bruce McReynolds**, 75, Santa Fe, Oct. 1  
**Harold "Harry" Steve Porter**, June 27

**Lydia R. Rivera**, 84, Santa Fe  
**Jose M. Sanchez**, Santa Fe, Sept. 29  
**William Lynch**, 87, Sept. 29  
**Joseph Micheal Padilla**, Sept. 20

**Eli Lonnie Valdez**, 47, Albuquerque, Sept. 30  
**Harris "Parker" Wells**, 92, Sept. 30  
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PHOTOS BY JIM WEBER/THE NEW MEXICAN

**Bryce Risley squeezes between small remote control balloons Friday while filling the envelope of his unmanned balloon. He says he feels a responsibility to carry on the ballooning tradition.**

# FLOATING OFF INTO THE SUNSET

Continued from Page A-1

old community," Risley said, "but it's significant because they're running out of time to replenish their community and grow it up to numbers that we are historically used to."

As local pilots and officials look beyond the 50th anniversary of the iconic event, there's a wide spectrum in the level of concern about the challenges facing the Albuquerque ballooning community.

Preserving existing landing spots for Balloon Fiesta participants and preparing or acquiring new landing sites amid urban development remains an agreed-upon priority, and recruiting new balloonists to replace those that are departing is something most acknowledge as important. But the degree to which such issues may have an impact on Balloon Fiesta and the ballooning community overall is up for debate.

Some people anticipate an upcoming drop in participation in the Fiesta — even saying it could leave the city's title of ballooning capital of the world up for grabs. Others claim calls for alarm are premature and that taking manageable steps will help the city maintain its reign.

"It's not anything to take for granted, obviously, but I don't think it's in danger," said Paul Smith, executive director of the Balloon Fiesta since 1997. "Albuquerque is the balloon capital of the world. ... I have not heard of anyone trying to claim our title or even

approach our numbers."

## Hard to say goodbye

Husband and wife pilots Robert and Sally Lupton began their balloon journey in Shawnee, Okla., where they'd known each other since they were 5.

Robert says they "had to be silly and went off to marry other people" but returned to their hometown, got reacquainted, and Sally took Robert for a balloon ride.

Sally had already caught the ballooning bug and mortgaged her car to buy a \$10,000 balloon system. "I've always been a little crazy," she said.

Robert then purchased his own balloon, and the two spent years traveling to events and flying together as their love for each other and ballooning grew.

They spent so much time at New Mexico festivals that they decided to move to Albuquerque in 1993. They got married that year in their crew chief's backyard, with Sally holding a bouquet of balloons.

Now both 74, Sally is participating in her 41st fiesta while Robert is in his 35th. It will be their last as pilots.

"We decided it was just time. Everything has gotten so much heavier," Robert said. "The time to prepare is just more difficult for us.

"We're not worried about the flying, but you've still got to pick it up and put it away. If we can't do our share, that's not fair to the crew and everybody else."

They plan on selling their Lady Jester balloon following the Balloon Fiesta.



**ABOVE: Veteran balloon pilot Robert Lupton tests his equipment as thousands gathered early Friday to watch the morning mass ascension. He and his wife, Sally Lupton, also a balloon pilot, plan to retire from ballooning this year.**

**BELOW: As a light rain starts to fall Wednesday at Balloon Fiesta Park, hundreds of balloonists gather to hear the weather report, safety tips and other news during the morning pilots' briefing. Ultimately, the persistent drizzle and low cloud cover prevented the morning launch.**

Risley said he knows many other retiring pilots will do the same.

For the Luptons, it's an emotional exit to a high-flying chapter of their lives. But the relationships they've built will remain.

"They're the main core of our social life," Sally said of their crew members,

many of whom have been with her for 40 years. "They're who we do birthdays with. We've been taking New Year's trips to spend sunrise with some of these people at various locations throughout the world. "Pretty much everything about our life and the jobs that we had and the people we've spent

time with has started with ballooning."

Ron Curry, 74, is another balloonist who is planning to make his exit after this year's Fiesta. Since 1980, he's been piloting for KKOB-AM Radio on a handshake agreement.

He's never been paid, but in return, he gets to have the KKOB Radio balloon in his possession at all times. He pays for fuel, the station pays for insurance, and every year he gets about 20 cases of Gruet sparkling wine to entertain riders. "It's been a very positive, unusual relationship," Curry said.

Curry's successor on the KKOB balloon will be a friend who's in his late 50s.

He said it's easy to see the demographic of the ballooning community getting older and that more young pilots will be needed to fill the void, but he thinks it's an issue that can be overcome with a focused effort.

"The Balloon Federation of America has a young balloonist school that they put on across the nation, and they're always encouraging young pilots to get involved," Curry said. "But it is a concern that has to be addressed, and it has to be promoted."

Robert Lupton said when he attends morning pilot briefings, the majority of pilots he's rubbing shoulders with are over 60.

"That's not just a function of age but a function of cost," he said.

While his wife purchased her first balloon for \$10,000, new balloon set-ups today can cost \$40,000 or more. With many already struggling to find affordable housing, he said ballooning is not financially realistic for most young people.

Risley has made his own remote control balloon with a 20-foot envelope to cut down on costs. He flew it during



Please see story on next page

Continued from previous page

Balloon Fiesta and said more people are getting into the lower-stakes version of the activity.

**Issues at hand**

The future of ballooning is a big deal for Albuquerque, in part because it's big business.

Especially during Balloon Fiesta. The market research firm Forward Analytics estimated the economic impact of the pre-pandemic 2019 Balloon Fiesta to be \$186.82 million.

Scott Appelman is the face of one big balloon business. The longtime pilot is the founder and president of Rainbow Ryders — the largest balloon ride company in the U.S. It's been the official ride provider for Balloon Fiesta since 1999 and has operations in Albuquerque, Phoenix and Colorado Springs.

Appelman said he was 12 when he attended the first Balloon Fiesta. This year marks the 40th time he has flown in the Fiesta.

Following the 50th anniversary event, Appelman expects future Fiestas to decrease in size due to multiple factors, including many pilots aging out and some balloonists shying away from participating due to decreasing landing sites as a result of urban development.

"The majority of pilots out here, they're here on vacation, they're here for fun," Appelman said. "They do feel very welcomed, the community is great and they have a good time with the camaraderie, but you also want to feel comfortable flying."

"It is becoming more and more challenging because of a lack of landing sites across the board in the Albuquerque area."

Rainbow Ryders requires its pilots to have a minimum of 500 hours of flight time. Still, the company's balloons sport huge gondolas that hold 12 to 14 people, which can be more challenging to set down, even for experienced balloonists.

The issue has been so prominent that the city of Albuquerque created a Balloon Fiesta Balloon Landing Task Force in 2018 to generate potential solutions to address the critical need.

Possibly looking to capitalize on the situation, Appelman said representatives from Phoenix have approached him and his company to feel out if their city could put together an event on a Balloon Fiesta scale while offering more open area.

"I'm not saying that that's happening, but those conversations have happened, and they're getting more real by the day," Appelman said. "And we are involved in them."

Appelman said it's been increasingly difficult to hire pilots for his Rainbow Ryders, and fewer are being found among local pilots.

"In Albuquerque, Phoenix and Colorado Springs, to me, I've tapped out all the best pilots I can find," said Appelman, who has 25 pilots at this year's Fiesta.

In addition to the 500 hours of flight time, Rainbow Riders requires its pilots to have second-class medical certification. This isn't a Federal Aviation Administration requirement for commercial balloonists yet, but Appelman and other officials said the organization's proposal could potentially be enacted before next year's Fiesta.

Appelman said the hassle of extra health requirements, forms and medical examinations could convince other aging pilots that it might be time to step away.

While the shrinking number of landing spots in the city is a concern during Balloon Fiesta, vanishing launch sites has been a challenge local pilots have had to face the rest of the year.

The Albuquerque Aerostat Ascension Association, or Quad A, is the city's ballooning club and is the largest such club in the world at about 600 members. The club is dedicated to providing social and educational opportunities for ballooning in the community.

Peter Cuneo, 71, is vice president of Quad A and has been piloting balloons along with his wife, Barbara Fricke, since the 1980s.

He and Appelman mentioned multiple popular launch sites that have been lost in the last month, including one near Presbyterian Rust Medical Center on Unser Boulevard.



**ABOVE:** Chase crews try to keep an eye on their balloon as they head out of the launch zone Friday.

**RIGHT:** Veteran balloonist Sally Lupton checks her balloon for holes Friday before the morning mass ascension. PHOTOS BY JIM WEBER/THE NEW MEXICAN



Cuneo said Quad A is in discussions with Rio Rancho Public Schools to possibly use some of its land as launch sites for club activities.

"In the years that I've been ballooning, we have moved farther west and farther north to have our launch sites, and that's just a process that's going to keep happening as Albuquerque continues to develop," Cuneo said.

Risley said the constant moves are having an impact on social groups that are foundational to the ballooning community.

"I've spoken to over 60 balloonists, and I've asked them 'What do you enjoy the most about it?' and the flying is secondary. It's the socialization, the camaraderie of being around each other," Risley said. "This fractioning up and parceling of land and relocating, you can't fit as many balloons into the next site that we might find to go to. So cliques of balloonists or friend groups get split up."

**Seeking solutions**

Amid the concerns some balloonists and officials have for the future, this year's Balloon Fiesta still brought in huge crowds and supported about 650 balloons.

The event has had a handful of previous locations prior to landing at its current site at Balloon Fiesta Park in 1996. The multi-use space, with its 86-acre launch field, is one in which the city has heavily invested. Moving again is something most people don't see as viable.

Balloon Fiesta executive director Smith said there has to be a continued commitment from the city and state to making the site work.

"We'll be talking to the Legislature and the governor in the coming months about how to preserve the spot so that Balloon Fiesta can stay in Albuquerque at our current location," Smith said. "There's a huge investment in Balloon Fiesta Park, and we don't want it to have a shelf life; we want it to be able to go on for as long as it can."

The Balloon Landing Task Force last year released a report outlining steps to preserve landing spaces from development and to acquire or transform other

stages and are yet to be implemented, he said.

Some balloonists think the city's efforts may be coming too late. Appelman and Risley said the city should have been doing things like burying power lines and preserving landing spaces many years ago when it realized the importance of ballooning and Balloon Fiesta to the community.

"The response to the lack of landing sites is 15 to 20 years too late, period," Appelman said. "Just as other cities have placed limitations on their development practices to preserve their cultural assets, Albuquerque has not," Risley added. "I think it will be recognized at some point that this lack of preservation for the cultural asset that is ballooning in Albuquerque will go down as one of the greatest squanderings in the city's history."

In terms of attracting new balloonists, it is pilots and crew members who are often the best ambassadors. In earlier years, Risley said many pilots have told him that balloonists flying over the city throughout the year would land in residential areas and be able to interact with children and adults, offering rides to draw interest.

Risley said those connections are occurring much less frequently these days with pilots typically sticking to safer routes in less developed areas. He said the balloon community needs to take itself to the people again, having a presence at public events. In addition to tackling *The Albuquerque Balloonist* project full-time, Risley has been networking with other communities to try to get them excited about ballooning. He said having a balloon event associated with Pride Fest is among the early initiatives he's pursuing. Receiving no pay for his project, Risley said he's been working odd jobs to keep gas in his car while traveling between Santa Fe and Albuquerque to conduct many of his interviews. His plan is to eventually work abroad in his field of study, but for now, he knows his purpose. "I've convinced myself this is the most important thing I could be doing with my life at this moment," Risley said. "I'm giving back to a community that I cherish and love and am a part of because I have a special skill set based on my education and where I was born. I take that seriously. It's a big responsibility."

**RIGHT:** Robert Lupton gives wife Sally a thumbs-up while they work to get in the air.

**BELOW:** Risley fills the envelope of his unmanned balloon Friday.

