

MAN RIDES CHAIRWAY TO HEAVEN
TIED TO BOUQUET
OF 55 HELIUM
BALLOONS
 CITY & STATE



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THE SUNDAY NEWS & OBSERVER



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Jonathan Trappe, the guy in the airborne office chair, is helped by his crew as he begins his 50-mile flight from an airport in Franklin County. Says Trappe: 'This is the greatest adventure I've undertaken.'

STAFF PHOTOS BY JULIE TURKEWITZ

HIGH TIMES

55 helium balloons carry a Raleigh man on a four-hour flight

BY LYNN BONNER
 STAFF WRITER

FRANKLINTON

Children sometimes wonder how many balloons they would have to hold to get airborne, even just for a second. Jonathan Trappe figured it would take 55 giant balloons to keep him floating high over Eastern North Carolina on Saturday.

Seated in his office chair, which was tied up like a giant party favor in the middle of a balloon bouquet, Trappe ascended from an airport in Franklin County just after sunrise, with friends, co-workers and the just plain curious cheering him on.

He flew about 50 miles in four hours, landing in a muddy field just north of Rocky Mount.

SEE THE FLIGHT "It's the most comfortable chair I've ever flown in," he said. "I had an amazing time."

& Find photos of Trappe's airborne adventure at newsobserver.com. For Trappe, 35, a technical projects manager who lives in Raleigh, the balloon flight was another chapter in the adventures of a worldwide traveler. He said travelers who know flight only as hours strapped in crowded, airborne cans "don't know the wonderful experience it can be."

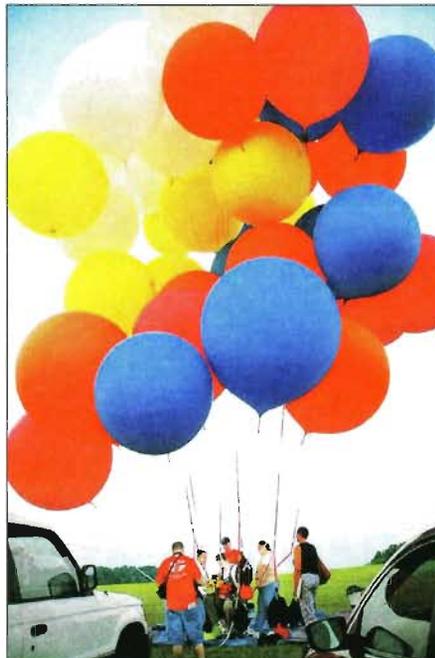
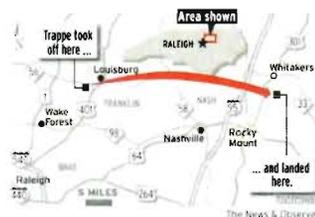
With a balloon, he said, "you move with the wind. It's the most pure form of flying."

A crew of about 20 worked three hours early Saturday morning, inflating the balloons with helium, connecting them with straps and cords to Trappe's chair and getting him ready for liftoff.

Karen Thompson, a software tester from Garner, came out to Franklin County to skydive and found Trappe and his group preparing for the flight.

"I've never seen anything like this," Thompson said. "I'm glad I was here. It's exciting, and I hope he makes it."

SEE BALLOONS, PAGE 5B



Fifty-five balloons float above Trappe and company before the flight. A crew of about 20 spent three hours inflating the balloons and connecting them to Trappe's chair.



Friends watch Jonathan Trappe and his flying chair fade into the distance. The only way Trappe could steer was to change altitude to catch the wind.

STAFF PHOTO BY JULIE TURKEWITZ

BALLOONS

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Trappe's whimsical adventure took months of preparation, training and test flights. He went to flight school in New Mexico and earned a Federal Aviation Administration license certifying him to pilot lighter-than-air free balloons.

One of the tests was an unmanned flight of the "gondola" — Trappe's office chair.

The chair, bearing a sticker that reads "It's a federal offense to tamper with an aircraft," on Saturday linked Trappe's work life and his hobby.

"This is the greatest adventure I've undertaken," he said. "I like to cause those two worlds to interact."

Trappe did not take the risks of his flight lightly. A handout showing how he assembles his balloons includes this warning: "Danger! Cluster ballooning is potentially extremely dangerous and could result in serious injury or death."

The last person to make news flying cluster balloons was a priest who was lost off the coast of Brazil in April while trying to break a flight record for charity.

Trappe said his preparations minimized the danger. The only way to "steer" the contraption was to change altitude to take advantage of wind direction. Trappe planned to stay clear of the coast and to stay away from Raleigh-Durham International Airport. But he said he told Raleigh air traffic controllers about his flight.

"My goal is to make a safe and legal flight," he said.

Trappe's balloon adventures have been the talk of his office at Accenture.

John Baynon of Cary, one of Trappe's co-workers, convinced

HOW HE PACKED FOR THE FLIGHT

Besides his office chair, here's what Jonathan Trappe took on his four-hour balloon flight Saturday:

parachute	helmet	snowboarding pants
oxygen	multipurpose tool	gloves
altimeter	scissors	ear protection
GPS satellite tracking system	pilot restraint system	hat
GPS personal locator beacon	flight bag	neck protection
charts	camera	freeze socks
kneeboard	pilot's license	sunglasses
pens	passport	sunscreen
plotter	cash	peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
	credit card	
	ski jacket	

his wife they should get up before dawn to head to Franklin County.

It could be the only time their three children ever get to see a guy flying a chair.

"He's the only guy I know who could do this," Baynon said.

Most of Trappe's crew became onlookers, as a few people floated him and the chair from the preparation area to the launch site.

"I'm really glad to do it," he said a few minutes before launch. "Still, a little scared."

His girlfriend, Nidia Ramirez, read off a list of safety gear, tracking devices and communications equipment that included a parachute, radio, gloves and cameras.

Trappe and Ramirez exchanged a few whispered words and kissed before he floated off.

She and a few others followed him in cars, to be close by when he landed.

Trappe reached an altitude of about 14,000 feet before deciding to come down.

The landing wasn't the most graceful. He got knocked out of the chair and dragged through the mud about 100 yards. His balloons popped when they hit trees at the field's edge.

"It was comical," Trappe said. "It was wonderful. No injury whatsoever. I would be delighted to do it again."

He plans to wash the chair and bring it back to work, so he'll have something to sit on Monday.

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