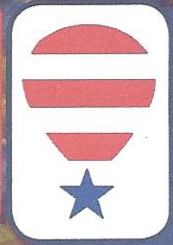


September / October 2011

# Ballooning

JOURNAL OF THE BALLOON FEDERATION OF AMERICA



## **Bobby Bradley In His Own Words!**

pg 20

## **Summer School in Telluride**

pg 26

## **Donner Dominates Texas**

pg 32

## **Sophie Blanchard: A New Film Documentary**

pg 40

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# A Promising Future

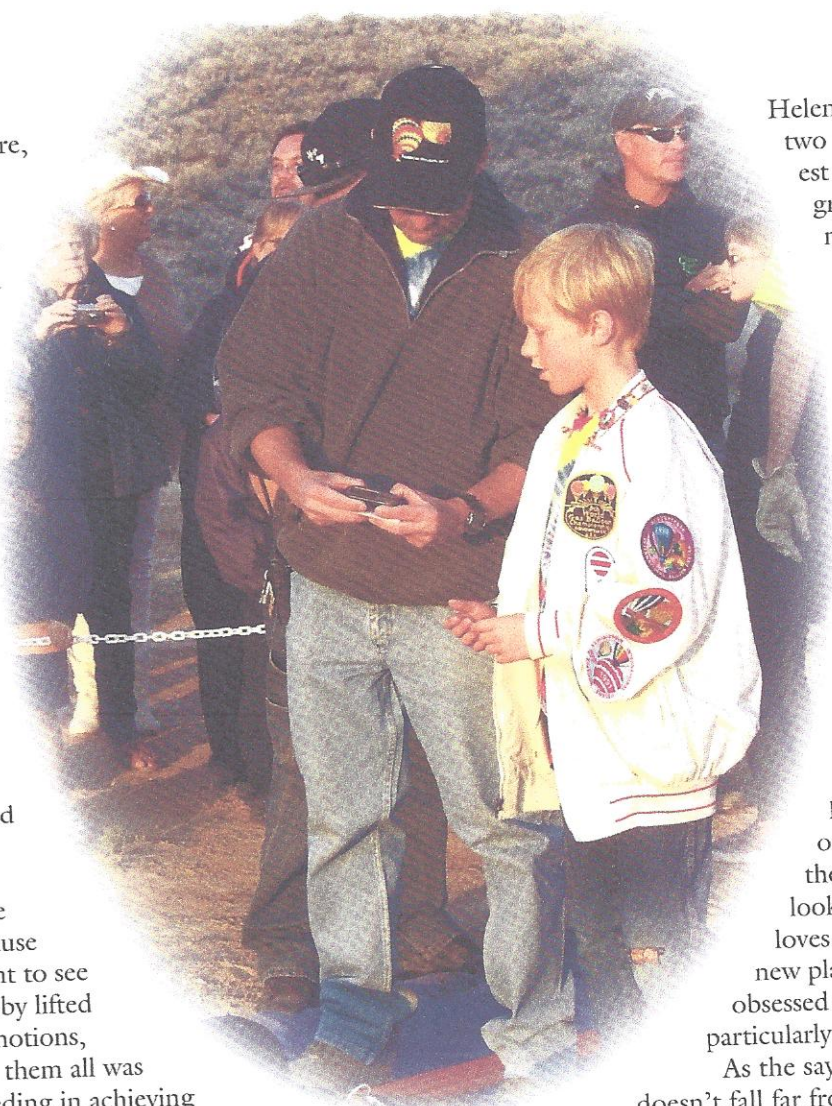
## Teaching a Young Pilot to Fly

by Troy Bradley

**He** had composure, confidence, and determination unlike any student pilot that I have ever signed off to solo! Beyond the normal stresses of a first solo flight, Bobby had to contend with a crowd of well-wishers and a large number of reporters. Nine year olds have a different outlook on life and Bobby saw the spectators and media not as stress inducers, rather as supporters of his landmark flight. Prior to lift-off, my wife, Tami, received words of wisdom from Bobby when he told her, "Mommy look at all of the people that came out because they love me and they want to see me succeed." When Bobby lifted off I experienced many emotions, but the one that trumped them all was pride! My son was succeeding in achieving his goal and the world was watching.

Some of life's episodes seem surreal. I found myself in one of those moments as Bobby lifted skyward. I began to chase him on foot with my radio in hand. The crew finally pulled up beside me in the chase vehicle beckoning me to get in. I had a huge smile on my face and memories of how wonderful I felt on my first solo some 33 years ago.

When I was a child, I dreamed of being able to pilot a balloon. Fortunately, this wasn't some fanciful pipe dream since I grew up ballooning with my grandparents, Jim and



Helen Dutrow. They were two of Colorado's earliest hot air balloonists. My grandparents embraced my goal and helped me achieve it by instructing me in the art of flying and allowing me to solo at the tender age of 14. That solo took place two years before I was able to or cared to get a driver's license. I wanted to fly balloons, not drive the chase vehicle.

Tami received her Private Pilot Certificate at 17 years old and I received mine at 16 years old. Our children, Savannah and Bobby, have a great appreciation of ballooning. However, they have two different outlooks on the sport: Savannah loves to crew and travel to new places for events; Bobby is obsessed with all things ballooning, particularly piloting.

As the saying goes, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. However, simply being exposed to an activity doesn't mean a child will want to actively participate. I have seen many kids grow up around balloons never expressing an interest in flying. Not Bobby!

Bobby's passion for ballooning has evolved over his brief, but entire, lifetime. His first balloon flight was at 11 months old, and he has never experienced life without balloons. As a typical child, he loved the sight of balloons but wasn't always enthralled with the noise or flames produced by the burners.

Once he was old enough to understand the correlation between operating the blast valve and the sound of the burner, his whole demeanor changed. I held him up to operate the blast valve during a glow at the 2006 Gallup Balloon Rally and he hasn't wanted to let go ever since.

Bobby has capitalized on every opportunity to be in the basket since that time. Prior to last year's America's Challenge Gas Race, Tami, semi-jokingly said, "Make sure to add 'Bobby is NOT in the basket' to your checklist". Gas ballooning will have to come later.

After years of using the foot holes in the basket as his windows, he longed to be a more active participant in the flights. His first free flight lesson was at age 6. He would stand on top of the 20-gallon lay-down tank and eventually graduated to standing on a stool in the center of the basket.

At first, I have to admit, the time he spent flying was more of a novelty in my eyes. As the number of flights increased, so did his grasp of the balloon's reactions to his input. When he first started flying I told him he couldn't look at the instruments but needed to develop a feel for the balloon. With 6-year-old logic he informed me, "Dad, I can't even read the instruments, but flying is easy. If the trees are getting bigger we are going down and if they are getting smaller we are going up." It doesn't get any simpler than that!

When he did begin to use the instruments, his precision astounded me. On one occasion, I told him to ascend to 6,000 feet MSL to catch a turn to the right. After requesting the climb I spent some time looking over the edge of the basket. All of a sudden, Bobby shouted, "Darn it!" I looked back to see what the issue was and he told me, "The altimeter says I stopped at 5,995 feet." He was mad at himself by missing the target altitude by 5 feet! Later relaying the story to George Hahn, he assured Bobby he was greatly exceeding any demands of the Practical Test Standards and still has many years to practice. To this day, any

maneuver I request him to execute he expects to perform at a level of precision that would make any DPE shake his head in disbelief and smile.

As with any student pilot, I expect more than simply imitating a burn pattern or being able to read a variometer. These are very easily learned, elementary skills. Understanding winds, airspace, navigation, fuel management, emergency procedures, pilot decision making, etc., were all skills Bobby needed as well as how to go up and down.

Cerebrally Bobby has always excelled; he is as comfortable in the classroom as he is in the air. He is going into 4th grade this year, reads and comprehends at an 11th grade level, is an accelerated math student, and is going on his 3rd year on the chess team (serving as team captain this year).

Over the years, besides flying, Bobby has attended many safety seminars, sat in on portions of ground schools, regularly attended the monthly AAAA meetings, and was a fully registered attendee at the last two BFA National Conventions. He constantly wants to discuss and decipher the information in these forums. His ability to understand, evaluate, and apply new knowledge consistently impresses me. His analytical abilities played a big part in our even considering an earlier than traditional age to solo.

Under CFR Title 14 Part 61 to be eligible to obtain a Student Pilot Certificate for balloon operations an applicant must be at least 14 years old. They must also be able to read, speak, write, and understand the English language. Bobby meets all of the simple criteria other than the required age. The FAA allows instruction to occur without holding a Student Pilot Certificate, but you are required to have one to solo under Part 61.

In 1982, the Federal Aviation Administration added CFR Title 14 Part 103 to cover powered and unpowered ultralight vehicles.

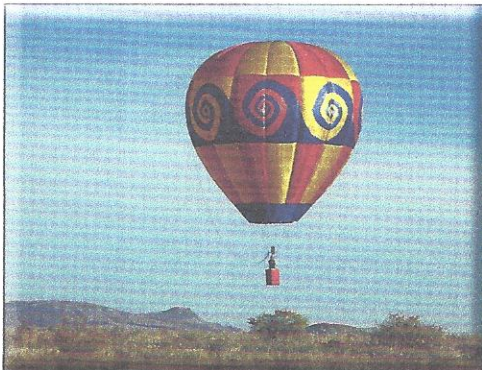


*Baby Bobby was introduced to the balloon basket at a very early age. Photo by Denise Ringler  
Opposite page photo by Douglas Riddle*

Balloons and gliders under 155 pounds, empty weight, qualify as unpowered ultralight vehicles. Most homebuilders choosing to build an ultralight vehicle do so to avoid the FAA paperwork and inspections required in building an Experimental Amateur-Built Aircraft.

One of the greatest benefits of the ultralight vehicle classification is the difference in pilot qualifications. Under Part 103 there are no age restrictions or certification requirements, so when Bobby expressed an interest in soloing this is where we focused. This provided a logical and legal solution for Bobby to stay within the regulations, yet solo before he turns 14 years old.

Flying an ultralight vehicle without proper training is neither recommended by the FAA nor me! Even though Part 103 doesn't require any training to operate an



*Once it was agreed to go forward with the project the balloon had to be designed. Then there was fabric to be dyed, dried, sewn and eventually test flown - by Troy, not Bobby!  
Top two photos by Kim Vesely, bottom left by Troy Bradley, bottom right by Jonathan Wolfe.*

ultralight vehicle, at the time of Bobby's solo he had logged quadruple the hours an average student pilot normally has soloing under Part 61.

I have over 5,400 hours in balloons (630 as an instructor) and feel very confident in my ability to judge a person's readiness for either a solo endorsement or check ride recommendation. I know my children's talents, limitations, and aspirations better than anyone, but there was still a tinge of apprehension in thinking of Bobby breaking the surly bounds of earth without me on board. Then I realized I would feel that way regardless of his age.

Bobby's level of flight skills, systems knowledge, and judgment were at a level I would solo any other student pilot, so I was willing to entertain the idea of a younger than normal solo flight. A solo must be earned; it isn't just an item to check off on a pilot training syllabus. Bobby had the abilities and desire.

He is also fortunate enough to have the opportunity not available to your average 9 year old. The purpose of Bobby's solo was the same as anyone else's reason for soloing, as a natural step in the progression of flight lessons.

When we, as a family, decided this was a goal worthy of pursuing we went at it wholeheartedly. The first step was designing a balloon that would qualify as an ultralight vehicle. I called upon my good friends Tim Cole and Bert Padelt to help with the size and weight calculations for the envelope.

Once we settled on the size (32,000 cubic feet), Tim designed the gore dimensions. He also gave Bobby a collapsible gondola he built. Jonathan Wolfe, aka the tie-dye guy, helped in designing and producing the unique design the envelope would showcase.

With the help of many friends and family, the little balloon, Heavenly Dream, was becoming a reality.

Tami's mother, Jan Stevenson, is an expert seamstress and put a lot of love and care into every stitch of the balloon that was going to carry her grandson to new heights.

The maiden flight of the newest addition to our fleet of balloons was on May 26th. Bobby was upset that he didn't get to make the maiden voyage in the balloon, but I told him he wasn't going to be the test pilot as well. Dad still has to make sure everything works properly! The balloon flew beautifully, no surprises and no problems! The next three flights were tethered flights for Bobby to get familiar with the balloon's response time and get an idea on the rate of fuel consumption. During those three tethers Bobby was able to do 50 take-offs and landings. He had a great feel for the balloon immediately and exuded the confidence of an experienced pilot.

His piloting experience and skills were mostly developed through the traditional methods I would use with any student pilot. Bobby's age and size did present a few challenges, prompting me to create innovative exercises. We had to practice emergency procedures before I would let him solo. Normally you would practice flame out procedures with the balloon inflated overhead. I rigged a brace on the swing set to hold the burner frame overhead, eliminating the added complication of worrying about the envelope. Bobby and I tested many different ignition sources and settled on one particular lighter that was easy for him to operate, and long enough to reach the pilot lights. We spent hours in the back yard practicing emergency relights until Bobby begged to stop and I was sure it was second nature to him. The beauty of teaching a young mind is you're dealing with a sponge; you don't have to break down bad habits, and new neurological pathways form easily.

Weather permitting, we tentatively set June 4th as the date for Bobby's solo. He was ready, the

*Continued on Page 22*

# Young, Younger Youngest?

by Glen Moyer

Within days of the media reports of Bobby's flight and their proclamations of his being the youngest to ever solo a balloon, veteran balloonist Brian Boland wrote to express his displeasure with these reports. His own son, Boland wrote, had soloed decades earlier and at a younger age than Bobby...

*"On August 10, 1968 my son Jeffrey Scott Boland was born. From age two he was subjected to his father's new found obsession with all things ballooning. He waddled around tripping on scads of fabric as his father bumbled through and built his first balloon then another and more. In 1974 I built Jeff a balloon called the 'Zenite' that was scaled to his size. Jeff had accompanied me as copilot or test pilot on many of my early experimental flights. On August 28, 1974, Jeffrey soloed the 'Zenite' from his grandparents' property at 55 Bankside Drive, Centerport, Long Island, New York. His age was 6 years and approx. 49 days at the time of his solo.... That is approx. 3 years younger than Bobby Bradley's solo, and about 37 years earlier.*

*The irony of all this is neither back then nor today are we or I claiming that my son Jeff was the youngest person in the World or all of history to ever accomplish such a feat. It never even occurred to us to lay such a claim."*

Boland questioned why the Bradley's would make such a claim and he was concerned that the media reports would result in Bobby being falsely crowned in history as the "youngest" to solo a balloon. To be fair, as Troy writes in his article, this was a media proclamation and not one that he, his wife Tami or Bobby ever sought. In fact they cautiously avoided such a claim, answering media inquiries by saying, "With all available information, we assume he is the youngest trained person to solo in a hot air balloon." At the time, the Bradleys were not aware of the Boland flight. Nor seemingly was the media or anyone else. Aside from personal records Boland says he retains, we've found no documentation of his son's flight.

It's clear that Bobby followed a specific training syllabus for his flight and it was made in accordance with the FARs as part of his planned pursuit of an eventual pilot certificate. Part 103 did not exist when the Boland flight occurred and from Brian's note it seems possible Jeffrey's flight was as much happenstance due to his father's immersion in ballooning as from any planned studies.

It remains however that neither Bradley or Boland could lay claim to the youngest, even if they wanted to. In the wake of the 2009 Colorado "Balloon Boy" hoax the media learned that 82 year old Bill Crawford, of Bradenton, FL, may be the original and youngest "balloon boy." In July, 1933, at age 4 he was tethered to a small gas balloon in Cleveland, Ohio, part of his parent's traveling air show act. But on this day the balloon broke its tether and off he soared. The media of the day proclaimed Crawford "The Youngest Balloon Pilot in the World." The event was widely documented in newspapers and newsreels.

Bobby has received accolades from far and wide including one special phone call from Bill Crawford!



*This backyard swing set rig served to allow Bobby to practice emergency burner relights and other skills ad nauseam.*

*Photo by Troy Bradley*

system was ready, and the date held historical significance for New Mexico ballooning. June 3, 1971, was Virginia Cutter's birthday and her son Sid inflated a balloon inside their hanger at Cutter Aviation for the party. The following morning Sid took the balloon out to the runway and without any instruction made the inaugural hot air balloon flight in New Mexico. The 40th anniversary of Sid's pioneering flight seemed like a wonderful date to usher in a new generation of balloonists with Bobby's solo. Sid wanted to witness Bobby's flight but passed away shortly before it happened. Bobby is certain he was there in spirit.

A well-prepared solo should be uneventful. Thankfully, New Mexico is blessed with the right combination of beautiful weather and wide open spaces to accommodate Bobby's flight. The launch site chosen was Tome, a small community south of Albuquerque that is a popular ballooning location. The area provides predictably good flying conditions, some roads to chase on, and there is a high likelihood that you won't encounter any obstacles or even cross a single power line in flight. Safety was the number one concern, and if everything didn't line up perfectly, we would have postponed the flight until suitable conditions were present. There was no rush. However, on the morning of Bobby's flight all the criteria we were looking for panned out, providing ideal ballooning conditions.

There were four balloonists that came out to fly with Bobby. Don Boyer is one of the most seasoned pilots flying the Tome area. He acted as a human pibal and took off first. He radioed back wind direction and speed at altitudes up to 1,500 feet AGL, which helped Bobby greatly with his flight plan. The other three balloons that accompanied Bobby on his flight were piloted by Scott Appelman, Ray Bair, and Jonathan Wolfe. Having balloons in close proximity helped Bobby with the different winds in flight and to provide a platform for aerial shots. Scott and Ray were both on the same radio frequency as Bobby, so he had aerial support and ground support with numerous chase vehicles.

The crowd that came out to support Bobby included friends, family, teachers, fellow students, and an entourage of media personnel. Not your typical solo flight! Most pilots,

the author included, would find this turn out overwhelming and somewhat intimidating. Bobby, on the other hand, calmly chatted with his friends, hugged grandparents, waved at amateur and professional photographers, and assured his mother he would be just fine. How old is he? He was as composed as any pilot has ever been on a solo. When it was time to set up and inflate, he meticulously went through his checklists. Checklists that he developed and I reviewed to make sure nothing was left off. His lists were comprehensive and complete.

I inflated the balloon while Tami worked with Bobby on putting on his pilot restraint and Savannah briefed him on the use of her phone in the event both of his two-way radios failed. There was redundancy in all the systems. That morning, the one rule we had with the media was no interviews prior to the flight. We wanted Bobby to stay focused on the flight and he did an outstanding job.

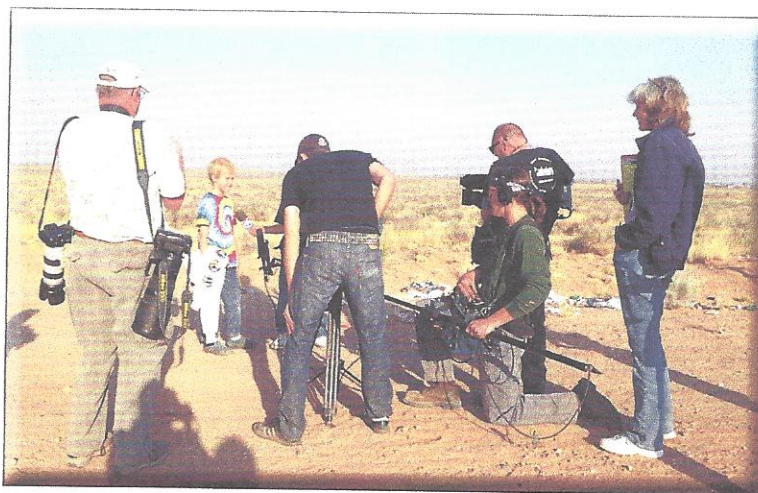
He climbed aboard, rechecked all of his equipment, got a clearance that there were no balloons above him, and lifted off flawlessly. The crowd was clapping and yelling good luck wishes, as the balloons slowly drifted from the field. I would have gladly placed a bet with anyone that viewed the launch from a distance that they couldn't pick out which balloon was being piloted by a 9 year old.

During the chase we had constant visual contact and Bobby sounded very comfortable on the radio. The other pilots were constantly checking various winds and helping the chase crew by identifying the most suitable roads for chasing. After approximately 20 minutes of Bobby's being airborne we positioned ourselves on a road downwind of the balloon right in line with his flight path. It was by far the best road in the area and I called Bobby to tell him we would be there to catch him. He responded by incredulously asking, "You mean you want me to land?" He said he had to do one more thing before landing and asked Savannah to get out of the truck. When she



*Be honest. Could you have performed a flawless first solo if you had faced this kind of attention and pressure, both before and after the flight?*

*Above photo by Douglas Riddle, below by Jill Stevenson*

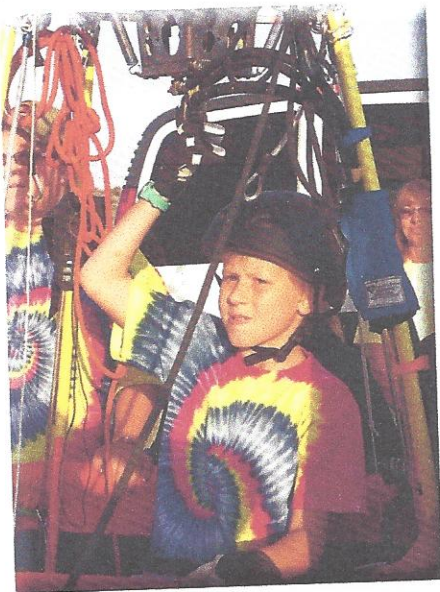


was out he ascended a little higher and threw out a toy parachutist, and she caught it. He didn't want to land prior to fulfilling the plan he made with his sister. After he was satisfied with dropping his parachutist, he initiated a nicely controlled descent, leveling out into an awaiting number of crew member's arms, and executed a perfect standup landing in the middle of the road. His total flight time was 26 minutes from beginning to end, and you couldn't have scripted a better flight.

At that point the media arrived and Bobby was swept up in a role that was foreign to him - being a

little celebrity. The flying is almost an innate part of his being, but having to talk on camera made him nervous. However, he quickly adapted and became adept at answering the questions. He did say they asked the wrong questions. Instead of, "Were you scared?" why didn't they ask, "Were you having fun?" He tends to have a more positive outlook on life. Maybe he could teach the media something.

The media attention was an interesting side note to the flight, but in no way the purpose of Bobby's solo. The media in general portrayed a very upbeat, feel good story, which was positive



*Above: Prior to launch Bobby's easy confidence turned into an expression of sheer determination. Top: Having other friendly pilots in the air with him helped Bobby with flight planning, navigation and communication. Top photo by Douglas Riddle, bottom by Kim Vesely.*

for Bobby and all of ballooning. Bobby made ballooning look cool to a new generation of potential pilots, and we will undoubtedly see a number of young people's interest sparked in our form of aviation. Bobby received worldwide attention that historically our sport only receives covering tragedies. Not since the intrigue of the attempts to circumnavigate the world has ballooning garnered such broad, positive attention.

A misconception, instilled by a media that loves sensationalism,

was that many people assumed this was intended to be a flight to put Bobby in the record books as the youngest balloon pilot. Having set 58 FAI World Records in balloons, I know about records and record setting as well as anyone. No sanctioning body including the National Aeronautic Association, the

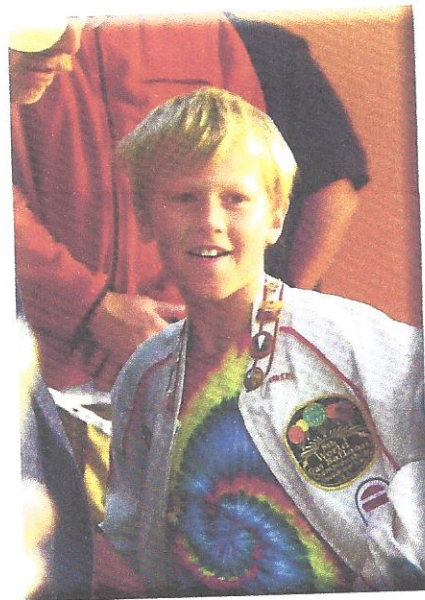
Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, or Guinness Book of World Records recognizes a category of youngest pilot.

Another protection was put in place in 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed the Child Pilot Safety Act into law following a tragic airplane accident of a seven year old (with an CFI on board) attempting to be the youngest to fly an airplane coast to coast. The Child Pilot Safety Act prohibits individuals who do not hold a valid private pilot's certificate from manipulating the controls of aircraft in an attempt to set a record or engage in an aeronautical competition or aeronautical feats. Regardless of laws or recognition, it would be careless and reckless to promote any sort of a category for youngest pilot. However, the question inevitably came up, and when asked by the press, "Is Bobby the youngest person to solo in a balloon?" We replied, "With all available information, we assume he is the youngest trained person to solo in a hot air balloon."

We were very specific in our wording because after thoroughly researching the question, the youngest documented balloon solo was by Bill Crawford. During the Colorado "Balloon Boy" hoax, Bill let the press know that he was "The Original Balloon Boy." In July 1933, he inadvertently broke loose from a tether and flew in a small helium filled balloon at age 4. At 4

years old, Bobby was just getting comfortable with the sound of the burner. Again claiming to be the youngest balloon pilot was not the purpose of the flight, but for the press it made for better headlines. This was not a stunt, record, mistake, or 15 minutes of fame!

Should any 9 year old child (or 14 year old for that matter) be allowed to solo in a balloon? Absolutely not! Bobby expressed a desire, demonstrated exceptional piloting abilities, and possessed intellectual and emotional capabilities greatly exceeding his chronological years. Those traits were what made me and Tami decide to provide him the opportunity to fulfill his dream to solo at a much younger age than most pilots. As parents, our job was to foster his dream in a legal and responsible fashion. Bobby did a fantastic job of showing the world what we already knew; he is a very capable young pilot. It will be a fond memory for Bobby to reminisce about his first solo, but his flying career didn't end when the reporters went home. The following two weekends Bobby soloed Heavenly Dream without all of the hoopla. He did it for the pure joy of flying!



*Photo by Stacie Gebeke*