

Shortly after I got my Balloon Pilot License I took my Dad for a flight and had him sit on a cushion on the floor for landing because I knew his knees would probably buckle on landing. I was a very new pilot and I knew it.

He absolutely loved the ride, but I decided right then that I would never do that as a commercial pilot.

Since that time, I've gotten calls every year about wheelchair access or a place to sit...

Over the years I thought about some anchor places in the basket for a wheel chair, but abandoned that idea pretty quick because it is after all an aircraft, and as an AME (Aeronautical Maintenance Engineer) I know you can't just willy-nilly make changes to an aircraft. You might unknowingly make something else worse.

I researched the requirements and the costs associated with the manufacture, import, shipping and operation of the balloon system I needed, and decided on a 6 passenger divided basket so there was space for 2 chairs, with a door.

It's more or less the smallest basket you can get for this purpose. 6 passengers, or 3 passengers and 1 chair, or just 2 chairs.

I thought about who would like to see this happen.

I thought about who could benefit.

I thought about a flying hockey rink.

I thought about how companies could advertise, get some cool swag for employees or clients, help with some bucket lists, and then write it all off.

And then I met a girl...

Erika Driesen came into my life last June when Steve Barahona asked me to take up a girl who had cancer and a bucket list.

I broke my no chair guideline and we had a good flight. It kind of turned out to be one of those bucket list flights for me.

Great passengers. My crew were happy. Exposure over the city. Video footage. Bucket list all the way!! The landing was pretty tame however I made some assumptions about her ability to get in and out and that reminded me how much easier and enjoyable a door and proper seat would have made the experience.

Erika passed away September 13, 2019.

I only really knew her for 3 hours but I felt compelled to go to her celebration of life.

I came away with a deep appreciation for her sense of adventure, zest for life and "Friends", and her desire to help and comfort other people.

That's why, with the blessing of her parents, this balloon's name is Erika.

Hopefully, our Erika Balloon will allow others to chase a dream too.