

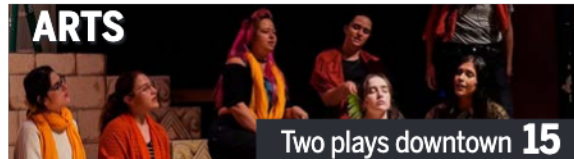


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IF YOU GO

JANUARY 17-19

Friday

- Kickoff event, Plaza de Las Cruces, 7-9 p.m.

Saturday

- Mass ascension, Field of Dreams, 7 a.m.
- Evening Glow, Field of Dreams, 5:30 p.m.

Sunday

- Final ascension, Field of Dreams, 7 a.m.

Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally rises again

DAVID SALCIDO
Las Cruces Bulletin

When was the last time the morning skies over Las Cruces were festooned with gayly colored balloons, suspended like bubbles across the valley? You'd be right if you said 14 years: That's how long it's been since the Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally did a launch from the City of the Crosses, but that's about to change. The rally is back, over the weekend of January 17-19, and this time around, they're bringing technology with them.

"One of the reasons we're doing this is because

we have full-sized balloons, but also the smaller radio-controlled balloons," said Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally organizer Christine Casillas. "Those are amazing, because they function like full-sized balloons, and we're hoping that will bring in a whole new generation."

That last part is a valid concern. The Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally had its humble beginning in 1977, with 13 balloons, but by the time the 21st century rolled around, it was second only to the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta in size and scope. Yet by the close of the first decade, there were fewer balloons and attendance was dropping off. Many of the stalwarts of the event were retiring

SEE **BALLOONS**, PAGE 16



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BALLOONS

CONTINUED FROM 1

and there didn't seem to be any new blood to pick up the slack. A hiatus ensued.

Casillas took on the daunting task of resurrecting the beloved event because she has memories of growing up and chasing balloons with her mother and sister. She's also engaged to a balloon pilot of 40 years and attends rallies all across the country. Her decision to bring the rally back to Las Cruces was a natural evolution.

"It just needed somebody to organize it, and I had the crazy idea that I could do it," she said. Securing the sponsorships of Visit Las Cruces and New Mexico True made the crazy idea a reality.

"If Visit Las Cruces had not helped us, I'm not sure we could have pulled it off. We would have had to wait

until 2026," Casillas said. She is quick to point out, however, that this rally is not a one-woman operation. There were a lot of local enthusiasts who jumped at the chance to bring the rally back.

"I'm doing this as a balloon enthusiast, but it's not just me," Casillas said. "We have a whole platoon of people who are helping to organize it, all working as volunteers. I have people from Deming and Alamogordo coming in to volunteer. My original vision for this rally was to have it as local as possible, which included all of the areas surrounding Las Cruces."

The next step in the resurrection was bringing in the balloons.

"We have balloonists coming in from Albuquerque, Missouri, Arizona, and beyond," Casillas said. "We have hot air balloons for all tastes. We have 20 full-sized balloons



VISIT LAS CRUCES PHOTO

The Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally is emerging from a hiatus, with support from the city of Las Cruces, to fill the skies with balloons in flight Jan. 18 and 19, with a kickoff event downtown on Jan. 17.

set to fly on Saturday and Sunday mornings. We also have 15 remote radio-controlled balloons."

And finally, vendors to supply the amenities like food and drink.

"I've got some good vendors who will be working hard during the rally," said Casillas. "I've got Francys Emilade, who has a huge following. She does the most amazing hot chocolate, ciders and lemonade. Organ Mountain Graphics will be doing kettle corn. Esteban's Mexican Food will be bringing breakfast burritos and gorditas. We'll also have beef jerky, and non-alcoholic Bloody Marys and margaritas."

With everything in place, the Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally is set to thrill valley denizens once again with the stunning sight of colorful balloons floating languidly across the morning sky. But first, there's the kickoff from 7-9 p.m., Friday, Jan. 17, when the radio-controlled balloons will gather and glow in the downtown Plaza de Las Cruces.

The next morning, around 7 a.m., Saturday, Jan. 18, the first morning ascension will take place at the Field of Dreams. The full-sized balloons will inflate and launch from the southwest dirt lot. The radio-controlled balloons will put on their show in the west parking lot.

Later that evening at sunset, around 5:30 p.m., the parking lots will once again be ground zero for the Evening Glow, where both the full-sized and the radio-controlled balloons will light up the night in a magical display of color. The final ascension occurs at sunrise, around 7 a.m., on Sunday, Jan. 19, once again at the Field of Dreams, in a repeat of Saturday's lift off.

Of course, all of this is dependent on clear weather. If it's too windy (more than 10 mph, according to the website), or

if there are storms within 50 miles, most pilots will not risk flying. The forecast for the weekend is clear and sunny, but only the gods of the desert know for sure, and the pilots have the final say.

With luck, this will be only the beginning for the next chapter in the saga of the Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally. One of Casillas' and her fiancé, John's, goals is to continue building interest between festivals, and that means building up the pilot population in the area. In this respect, the future is looking bright for the couple. Interest in ballooning, it seems, is on the rise again.

"There used to be a lot more pilots living in Las Cruces, but a lot of them moved away, or retired," she reminds us. "It's just a matter of having an instructor who is available. In order to be able to instruct, a pilot needs a commercial rating. Once that's achieved, they can take on students, who in turn can log instruction hours. So, having a commercial-rated pilot in the area is crucial. There are actually a lot of young pilots coming in. One of John's students is in his 30s, and another is in his 20s. And we just met three more students over the weekend, and they're all young."

The Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally lifts eyes to the skies Jan. 17-19, first at the Plaza de Las Cruces, 100 N. Main St., then at the Field of Dreams, 2300 Tashiro Drive. For more information, visit the website at MesillaValleyBalloonRally.weebly.com



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