

Natalie J. "Nikki" (Zemliak) Caplan
Inducted into the U. S. Ballooning Hall of Fame on July 27, 2014
By the Balloon Federation of America at the
National Balloon Museum, Indianola, Iowa



◀ Nikki's 1st hot air balloon the "Les Sprit de St. Louis" ("Spirit of St. Louis"). built by Don Piccard was shared with her husband Don



Husband Don later had an Adams hang balloon matching the one above ▶



Nikki Caplan



Nikki's 2nd hot air balloon was named "UNICORN"



Nikki checking flight map at 1973 U. S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship



Nikki's gas balloon "CITY OF ST. LOUIS"

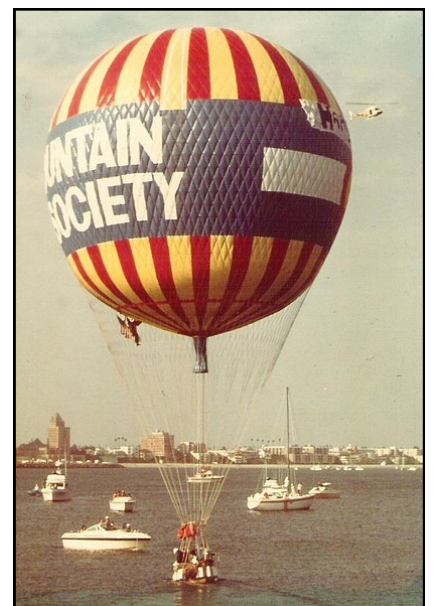


Memorial bust of Nikki at the National Balloon Museum and at the St. Louis Aero Museum



Nikki and her co-pilot, Jane Buckles

Nikki and her husband Donald were both members of the Rocky Mountain Ballooning Society ▶



NATALIE “NIKKI” JOYCE (Zemliak) CAPLAN

August 7, 1930 - June 28, 1985

St. Louis, Missouri

EARLY YEARS: Nikki Caplan was born Natalie Joyce Zemliak on August 7, 1930 in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the daughter of Samuel W. Zemliak and Jeanne E. (Smisman) Zemliak and was raised in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, Chicago and St. Louis. Her father was a wholesale tobacco and liquor distributor for southern Illinois, and her mother was an independent accountant. Nikki had a sister, Diane and a brother named Werner. She married Donald S. Caplan in June 8, 1952 and they had three children, Drew, Elizabeth and Scott. Nikki is shown at right with her husband Donald who was also a balloonist of note.



EDUCATION AND CAREER: Nikki studied accounting and communications at the University of Missouri at Columbia but dropped out when Don joined the Air Force. Returning to college in 1958 she earned a B.S. in Chemistry from Washington University in St. Louis in 1961 and a M.S. degree in Chemistry at Georgetown University. She subsequently became an Analytic Drug Chemist for the Food & Drug Administration in 1962-1970, and a chemistry professor at the St. Louis College of Pharmacy in 1970. She also spent some time as a radio broadcaster, but ultimately she became known as a professional balloonist in both gas and hot air balloons. In addition Nikki served as a Captain in the Illinois Wing of Civil Air Patrol and as Chief Flight Instructor for the Balloon Solo Program for Cadets at the summer Flight Encampment. She also became an FAA Examiner Designee for both flight and written tests and taught a ground school course on ballooning at Meramec Community College in St. Louis.

BALLOONING CAREER: Nikki's first exposure to ballooning occurred when she read an article in National Geographic Magazine about Don Piccard who flew and manufactured hot air balloons in California. She thought that sounded interesting, so she contacted Piccard and it was not long before she had her first balloon, a 1968 model AX-6 made by Piccard named "Les Sprit de St. Louis" ("Spirit of St. Louis"). Nikki had her first balloon flight in 1968. She received her pilot's license in 1971 at the age of 41. See pictures of her first hot air balloon the "Les Sprit de St. Louis" and her second hot air balloon the "Unicorn" and her first gas balloon the "City of St. Louis" on page one.

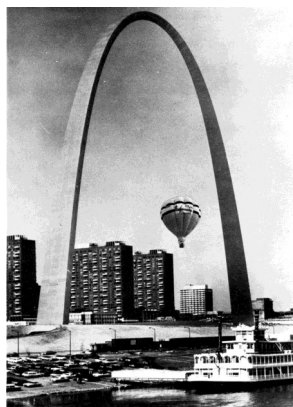
Nikki was a pioneer in modern hot air ballooning. She was the first balloon pilot in the state of Missouri. Her first major competition was at the 1973 National Hot Air Balloon Championships in Indianola, Iowa where she was one of only two women to qualify for the finals. After that time she participated in many ballooning events around the country as well as Europe and Asia. Nikki was always active in organizing, teaching and promoting ballooning. She has taken first, second and third place in many ballooning events such as Kentucky Derby Festival Race, Indiana State Fair, Illinois State Fair, and the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. She has also flown in many parts of the United States as well as in Europe and Asia. Nikki did much to promote ballooning and was one of the first to seek commercial sponsorships and advertise for various companies with her balloon, and her balloons were often seen over the city for civic and charity events as well. In addition to her ballooning exploits she also volunteered her services in various roles for the Balloon Federation of America. She served on the B.F.A.'s Board of Directors in 1976-1979.

In 1973 Nikki Caplan and John O'Toole founded the Great Forest Park Balloon Race. Over the years since then, this race has become the oldest and most well-attended free one-day hot air balloon event in the world. The event originates from the middle of a major city, St. Louis, Missouri. Attendance is free to more than 100,000 spectators who come to watch 70 world-class balloon pilots compete in the race.

Also in September of 1973 Nikki became the first person to legally fly a balloon through the Gateway Arch. There is a law against flying through the Arch, so she was given permission. She ascended with the Gateway Park Director in her basket and her balloon touched one of the legs of the arch two thirds of the way up, but since the arch is covered in smooth metal there was no damage to either the arch or the balloon.

In 1979 Nikki became a Captain in the Illinois Wing of Civil Air Patrol and was Chief Flight Instructor for the Balloon Solo Program for Cadets at the summer Flight Encampment and continued in that capacity through 1984.

In 1983 Nikki received the Montgolfier Diploma, the highest award bestowed upon a balloonist by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale. She logged over 1,500 hours of balloon flying during her ballooning career.





In this picture at left, Nikki and crew had the bright idea of wrapping wooden poles with asbestos to hold the mouth fully open after flapping air in the envelope (no fans yet then). That enabled them to fire the burner directly through the sticks into the balloon and the asbestos prevented the poles from igniting. They discovered, however, that when you heat wood wrapped that way there is no oxygen and the heat therefore turns the wood to charcoal and it crumbled to bits, so the idea only worked the first time.

at left. She organized the McDonnell-Douglas Aero Classic Gas Balloon Race in St. Louis. in 1982 where the Washington Monument was the aeronauts' target. Her husband Don also participated.



▲ Nikki and her co-pilot, Jane Buckles

In 1982 she and her co-pilot, Jane Buckles, set a new world feminine distance record for AA-6 through AA-15 Class gas balloons in a long flight from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Duncombe, Iowa. The record flight was 843.59 miles. She was also president and chief flight instructor at the Balloon Port of St. Louis, a sales and service agency for The Balloon Works, a manufacturer of hot air balloons owned by balloonist Tracy Barnes. This port was one of only three certified repair stations in the country.



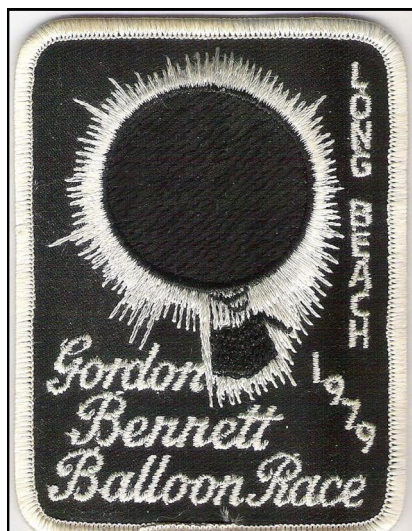
Nikki and her children in 1973
Left to right: Drew, Nikki, Scott & Lizz



Willie Piccard, Don Caplan, Nikki Caplan and Don Piccard at the 1973 U. S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship in Indianola, Iowa in 1973



Nikki wearing her jump suit which matched her first balloon, "Spirit of St. Louis" pictured on page 1



Nikki participated in the Gordon Bennett Balloon race in 1979



◀ Nikki in her airplane, a 1938 Meyers OTW

Don had a Japanese artist carve this model of Nikki's "Unicorn" Balloon ▶



Timeline of Nikki Caplan's Ballooning Accomplishments and Awards

- 1968 - Had her first ride in a balloon
- 1972 - She had her first solo flight
- 1973 - Became a licensed balloon pilot and started actively flying
- 1973 - Nikki's first major competition was at the National Hot Air Balloon Championship in Indianola, Iowa, where she finished 16th in a field of 80
- 1973 - Organized the first Forest Park Balloon Race which eventually grew to an event viewed by over 100,000 people each September
- 1973 - Nikki was the first person to fly an aircraft through St. Louis Gateway Arch with permission. (Others did it without permission which was illegal.)
- 1974 - She along with other ballooning enthusiasts established the "Gateway Aerostatic Association", with the mission to promote the sport of ballooning within the Midwest. She was its first president.
- 1974 - Became a designated examiner for the F.A.A.
- 1974-78 - Served on Balloon Federation of America Events Committee
- 1975 - She opened Balloon Port of St. Louis and sold and repaired balloons
- 1977-84 - FAA Balloon Pilot Examiner
- 1976-1979 - Member Board of Directors of the Balloon Federation of America & chaired committees
- 1976 & 1979 - Received the President's Award from the Balloon Federation of America
- 1977 - Won Missouri State Hot Air Balloon Championship in Pershing, Missouri
- 1977-79 - Official pilot for the Illinois State Fair
- 1978 - Nikki was named "Official State Balloonist" for the state of Missouri by the Governor
- 1978 - Organized the first North Central Regional Hot Air Balloon Championship
- 1979 - Flew the "Pathfinder" balloon in the Gordon Bennett Balloon Trophy Cup Race in Long Beach, CA.
- 1979-1984 - Captain in the Illinois Wing of the Civil Air Patrol and Chief flight Instructor for her Balloon Solo Program for Cadets
- 1979-80 - Recipient of the Achievement Award from the Ninety-Nines Greater St. Louis Chapter of women aviators and the Shields-Trauger Award
- 1980 - Nikki flew her "Unicorn" balloon in the XIII Winter Olympics Opening Ceremonies in Lake Placid, New York
- 1981 - Was a competitor in the Gordon Bennett Balloon Race
- 1981 - Nikki placed second in the Trans Lake Biwa race in Japan
- 1982 - Set feminine distance record & 16 world records for gas balloons in the AA-6 through AA-15 class, a flight of 843.59 miles from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Duncomb, Iowa, in her 35,000 cubic foot "City of St. Louis" gas balloon. She was accompanied by her co-pilot, Jane Buckles
- 1982 - Nikki was awarded the Montgolfier Diploma in Los Angeles, California, the highest award for a balloonist from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale
- 1982-83 - Nikki and her husband Donald organized the Mc Donnell Douglas Aero Classic Gas Balloon Race in which the Washington Monument in Washington, D. C. was the aeronauts target
- 1983 - The City of St. Louis proclaimed "Nikki Caplan Day", and named her "World's #1 Woman Balloonist"
- 1983-84 - She was instrumental in helping rewrite the private and commercial FAA written exams for ballooning
- 1984 - Nikki and her co-pilot, Jane Buckles, representing the United States, became the first all female crew to participate in the James Gordon Bennett International Balloon Race in a 210-mile flight from Switzerland to France, a race in which they received 11th place
- 1984 - Logged 294 hours as gas balloon pilot
- 1985 - Received the Shields-Trauger Trophy from the Balloon Federation of America at Indianola, Iowa
- 1985 - Served as Safety Seminar Chairperson for the Balloon Federation of America from January until shortly before her death, June 28, 1985
- 2014 - Inducted into the U. S. National Ballooning Hall of Fame at the National Balloon Museum, Indianola, Iowa



We are grateful to the following sources for information and/or images included in this document: the Caplan family, National Balloon Museum Archives, Federal Aeronautic Internationale, Who's Who in Ballooning by Robert J. Rechs, 1983, and Ballooning: Journal of the Balloon Federation of America.