

Jeff "Kong" Shields

July 1, 1958 — June 19, 2021

ENUMCLAW, WA -

Walla Walla resident Jeff "Kong" Shields, 62, died June 19, 2021. Celebration of life will be held at a later date.

Sir Richard Branson of Virgin Group, and actors Tim Curry, Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn learned to fly hot-air balloons courtesy of Walla Wallan Jeff "Kong" Shields.

Forty years of safe lighter-than-air (LTA) piloting later, Kong garnered an Ed Yost Master Pilot Award from the Balloon Federation of America. The certificate was presented during the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, which ran Oct 6-14.



The award recognizes BFA member LTA pilots who have demonstrated professionalism, skill and aviation expertise by maintaining safe operations for 40 or more consecutive years as active pilots.

In a 2007 obituary on TheGuardian.com, pilot, inventor and designer Ed Yost is described as "the rumbustious American aviator who created the modern hot-air balloon."

Kong said in information he submitted to the BFA that he fell in love with the sport in fall 1972 when Col. Chauncey here. Chauncey for many years held the world record for high altitude — 53,200 feet in an open basket — and founded many balloon races around the country.

Kong said Chauncey spent a week in Walla Walla.

"After being spellbound watching his first flight I showed up to crew on all the subsequent flights that week."

While here, Kong said, Chauncey sold a couple of other local enthusiasts on ballooning, and when Nat Vale and Bill Lloyd took delivery of their new balloons, Kong began crewing with them and learned to fly In 1973.

He considers earning his pilot certificate as his first big accomplishment because he's flown in many places around the world he might have never seen otherwise.

"Soloing in a balloon with two hours of instruction was pretty exciting," he recalled.

"It has allowed me to meet hundreds of people in ballooning all over the globe that have formed who I am and helped me to see things from a world perspective," he said.

"Flying a balloon for me is the most serene peaceful thing in the world," he wrote. "Things make sense for me in the air and all of my troubles slip away. When life gets me down, flying a balloon heals me."

He's also drawn to the pursuit because of the people he's met in the ballooning community. "All of my closest friends came to me because of ballooning."

Among those memorable experiences, he said, are being on a team that flew the first balloons in Colombia; flying over the Swiss Alps at 18 in his first gas balloon flight; flying a balloon to 27,836 feet up, the highest he's ever been; flying the Mickey Mouse balloon over Portland with Mount Hood in the background; flying over Niagara Falls for a movie shoot with 40 other balloons.

"Flying balloons in the Masai Mara game preserve in Kenya while watching the sun rise at 16,000 feet above Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa was pretty hard to beat," he said, but "I believe my coolest experiences in ballooning have been mentoring young people and getting them involved in ballooning at a young age."

He's flown corporate balloons with logos on them for many businesses, including Grab On, a manufacturer of foam grips for motorcycles and bicycles based in Walla Walla.

The Grab On balloon was the first commercial contract he and brother Scott sold and operated for themselves.

Other clients have been Budweiser, 7UP, Coca-Cola, regional propane Gas that became AmeriGas, ReMax, Kool cigarettes, RC Cola, Wendy's, Virgin Airlines, Freixenet Champagne, Greenpeace, Black Angus restaurants and Yoplait yogurt. For several years, he also flew a fleet of special-shape balloons for billionaire Malcolm Forbes.

He's flown balloons in nine movies; was the first balloonmeister for an event in Albany, Ore.; and served at different times at Moses Lake and Kent, Wash.; Missoula, Mont.; Portland, Maine; Greenville, S.C.; and in Walla Walla, where he also served 22 years as safety officer. He has operated balloon-ride businesses in Walla Walla; Phoenix, Ariz.; Portland, Ore.; and New South Wales, Australia.

Other famous people he's taken aloft include TV newscaster Walter Cronkite, musicians Bonnie Raitt, Jackson Browne, members Decemberists,

Case, David Bowie, Annie Lennox and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones.
Kong is the son of Betty Lodmell of Walla Walla.

https://www.union-bulletin.com/local_columnists/etcetera/uplifted-by-ballooning-local-pilot-receives-safety-award/article_a855fc42-0212-11e9-b615-6fd72c0dea1a.html

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR2-AmtHyIFJGuCaP75vo3ti6zfq9VJ0nzbBoyuaJXkZGr4xsdJI0Mm504Q&v=m8R48zg9uSg&feature=youtu.be#>