

Meet YOUR AIRPARK  
NEIGHBOR

# Ms. Ballooniverse

By Jimmy Magahern

Francine Kades would like to throw Phoenix a parade.

The local balloon artist, founder and owner of North Scottsdale's The Balloon People, was one of 44 balloon professionals invited from around the world to create fanciful, eye-popping balloon floats for the 48th annual Chicago Pride Parade this past June. She'd like to replicate the event at next April's Phoenix Pride Festival – or perhaps sooner. Even the city's Veterans Day parade, she suggests, could use a balloon upgrade.

She passionately describes the Chicago event across a table at Yogi's Grill at the Camelback Colonnade, after wrapping a giant balloon arch over the entrance to the new "flexible-format" Target store at 16th Street and Camelback Road – a typical grand-opening gig for the busy balloon artisan. Kades muses over how the Valley might receive such a grand display of balloon awesomeness.

"No one here has ever seen anything like what they put on in Chicago," says Kades, an immigrant from Johannesburg, South Africa, who lived in L.A. before eventually settling in Scottsdale. She still speaks with the charming cultivated British "acrolect" of the region's upper class, which suits the Scottsdale socialites whose elaborate sweet sixteens, bar mitzvahs and weddings provide the bulk of her business. "I'm not the cheapest," she readily submits.

"There were 43,000 balloons," she says. "And there were over 40 of us working around the clock for four days, just creating all this stuff. We wound up with two blocks worth of color – it was mesmerizing. We made up the theme 'Life Is Sweet,' and we had balloon gummy bears as wearable costumes. We had people carrying giant balloon cupcakes, ice cream cones and

Francine Kades  
is a balloon artist  
and founder of The  
Balloon People.

(Photo by Kimberly Carrillo)



The balloon arch Kades' company recently created for a Target store

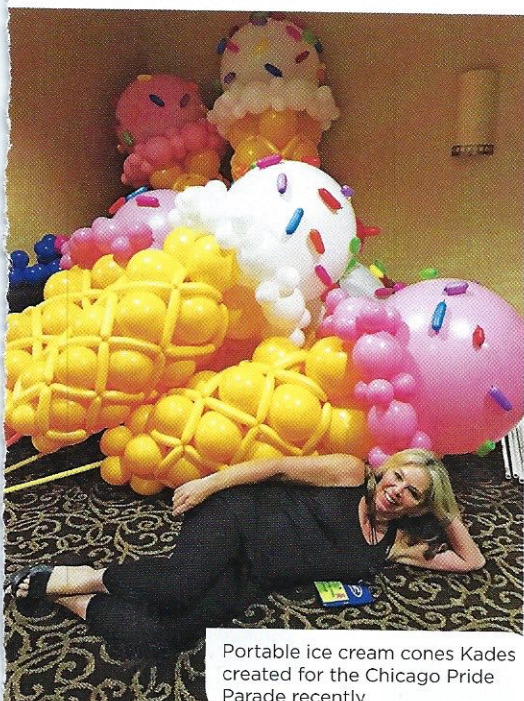


(Photo courtesy Francine Kades)

gumball machines. It was vibrant and colorful and beautiful.

"People here don't know what is possible," Kades says. "And unless you see it, you can't understand it. So I think I'm going to have to do a parade with us walking and wearing all the inflatables and then hopefully some corporate event bookers will be interested in having us do the same for them."

"Us" consists of Kades and two assistants: Ranier Mehlaui, an in-demand balloonist ("other companies are always trying to hire him away from me") with whom Kades has worked for 27 years, and Joshua Chavez, a young "superstar" she's been working with for only three months ("but he picked it up immediately," she raves). During peak seasons, like New Year's Eve ("that's the balloon artist's Super Bowl"), Kades, who runs the business out



Portable ice cream cones Kades created for the Chicago Pride Parade recently.

(Photo by Kimberly Carrillo)



Francine Kades stands in the middle of balloon sculptures her company created for the Chicago Pride Parade.

(Photo courtesy Francine Kades)

of her home near the southwest corner of Scottsdale Airport, has about five other assistants she enlists.

Kades is all about elevating the art of balloon "stacking," which the industry differentiates from balloon "twisting," an advanced art unto itself. "We're called stackers because we basically stack round balloons into décor, as opposed to twistlers, who twist long balloons into shapes. The best of them are really gifted – as are we!"

The former paralegal and mother of two got into ballooning after a divorce 13 years ago, when she attended a franchise presentation in Phoenix by a balloon manufacturer. "I didn't buy into the franchise, but I bought an afternoon's worth of training!"

She's since evolved into one of the Valley's most sought-after balloon artisans, crafting elegant yet complex creations like the display

she made for a national business conference held at The Phoenician in 2015, with balloons suspended from the ballroom ceiling filled with 21 Rolex watches – gifts for the company's top salespeople. Kades devised a way to have the balloons pop simultaneously and drop the watches by strings, stopping just above the heads of the awardees.

"People don't appreciate all the work that goes into this," she says. "We have to be not only artists but scientists and meteorologists, because of all the weather conditions that affect balloons."

Kades says her biggest thrill is seeing clients' reactions when she brings what's in their wildest imaginations to life. "That's what makes my week," she says, "when they're bowled over by the results. It doesn't happen with every job, but when it does, that's spectacularly rewarding." ■