

Children's dreams soar on airship



Ameriquest Blimp painted by 6,000 young people

By **TITUS GEE**
 Valley Press Staff Writer

High above the City of Angels floats a mystery — a brightly colored airship dressed from tip to tail in fanciful shapes.

The thickly bordered, overlapping geometrical shapes give the ship the look of stained glass turned whimsical.

No company logo mars its design. No advertisement explains its purpose.

Yet this blimp is an ambassador.

Hand-painted by nearly 6,000

children, the Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship carries a message of teamwork, perseverance and accomplishment.

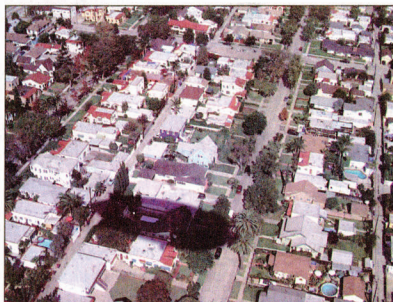
It docks at the private terminal of Long Beach Airport.

The kids, many of whom face emotional or physical challenges, used 450 gallons of paint to cover the 40,000-square-foot surface of the airship.

"It's really kid-driven. It's kid power," said Ed Massey, who organized the project.

In 1995, Massey and his

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AIRSHIP FOR THE KIDS

The Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship, above left, docks at the private terminal at Long Beach Airport. The blimp was hand painted, one square at a time, by nearly 6,000 children with physical or emotional challenges.

Above, co-pilot Corky Belanger looks down on Long Beach. The shadow of the Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship, left, plays across suburban houses near Long Beach Airport.

TITUS GEE
 Valley Press photos

A8 Tuesday, December 20, 2005, Antelope Valley Press

AIRSHIP: Blimp painting project involved special kids' brushes

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brother Bernie founded Portraits of Hope, a nonprofit organization that works with children to create large-scale artworks. The brothers work with children's hospitals to involve critically ill children in the art projects.

The Masseys finished their first project, a 165-foot tower in Beverly Hills, in the spring of 2000. Other projects decorated an entire 1937 DC-3 airliner and the walls of a sports arena in Japan. Future projects may include a tug boat and a fleet of taxi cabs.

The airship painting arose from the efforts of kids and teens across the Southwestern United States, including the Boys and Girls Club of Bakersfield and the Bakersfield Unified School District.

A fortunate collaboration with the Ameriquest made The Soaring Dreams Airship possible, Massey

said. Each Portraits of Hope project begins as a bureaucratic struggle for permission and support, so finding a partner like Ameriquest can be the key to success.

"It takes a real rare, credible foresight to do this type of project," Massey said, "and Ameriquest has gone full-throttle ... to get this thing literally off the ground."

Brandt, the vice president at Ameriquest, said the Portraits of Hope concept fitted nicely with after-school activities run by the company. Ameriquest also had an airship in production, Massey said — the largest passenger airship in the country. Ross Higgins, one of the blimps handlers, said it also may be a record-setter for speed. Average groundspeed for a blimp is 35 mph, but Soaring Dreams had been clocked at 80 mph, he said.

Once the alliance had been forged, the Masseys tackled the practical challenge of bringing their soaring dream to reality.

Portraits of Hope developed special brushes to make painting easier for the ill or physically challenged children. Kids used telescopic paintbrushes, shoe brushes and brushes with fruit-flavored handles for those who could only paint using their mouths.

The young people created more than 200 different shapes, that were then assembled on the airship by a team of six technicians from Britain. An exercise in visual vamping created the aircraft's unique and eye-catching look, Massey said.

"It's kind of like jazz, where we improvise," he said, adding that no one knew quite what it would look like until all the over-lapping sec-



TITUS GEE/Valley Press photos

KID POWER — Left, Valley Press writer Titus Gee looks down on Long Beach from the Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship. Right, The Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific comes into view on board the blimp.

tions had been applied.

The work of all these hands, feet and mouths yielded a remarkable artwork.

"I think there really is something incredible that these children have pulled off," said Julie Brandt, senior vice president of philanthropy for Ameriquest.

"They may never meet each other but they're working together," Massey said, to create the "first ever hand-painted airship."

The Massey brothers found inspiration for Portraits of Hope during a visit to a children's hospital, he said. Ed Massey had brought art to the masses through various public art projects. He also

wrote books for children. Portraits of Hope brought his two passions together, Bernie Massey, a self-described "social entrepreneur," had extensive experience in organizing charitable ventures.

Portraits of Hope draws heavily from each man's skill set to create an unusual, but inspiring, blend of art and encouragement.

"When you think outside the box, truly imaginative and creative things will come out of it," Ed Massey said.

The rewards of seeing his own dreams realized, through the successes of the project, have been immense.

"If we didn't go to them, (many

The airship is docked at a private terminal at Long Beach Airport. The blimp was hand-painted, one square at a time, by nearly 6,000 children with physical or emotional challenges.

of these children) would never be able to be a part of something this big," he said. "To see a child smile when, in whatever way, they are grasping that paintbrush ... is so empowering."

One moment stuck with him from the airship project. A young teenaged girl had refused to leave her room for months. Her despondency spurred the hospital to keep her under observation, but when the Soaring Dreams program came to her ward the girl emerged and joined the other children in the painting.

"The parents are saying, 'We don't believe what we're seeing ... You could see the emotion' in their

faces," Massey said. "To get (such) gratifying moments is just worth a million bucks!"

Brandt agreed that such moments make all the effort worthwhile.

"I think that the work that these children are doing, if you could see them in action, would make you very optimistic," she said.

The organizers hope the blimp will carry that message to people all over the country.

Thanks to the children, "it has the spirit and the heart that no other airship in the world has," Massey said. "Look overhead. You never know when it might stop in town."

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