

FRIDAY
June 24, 2005

The Daily Review

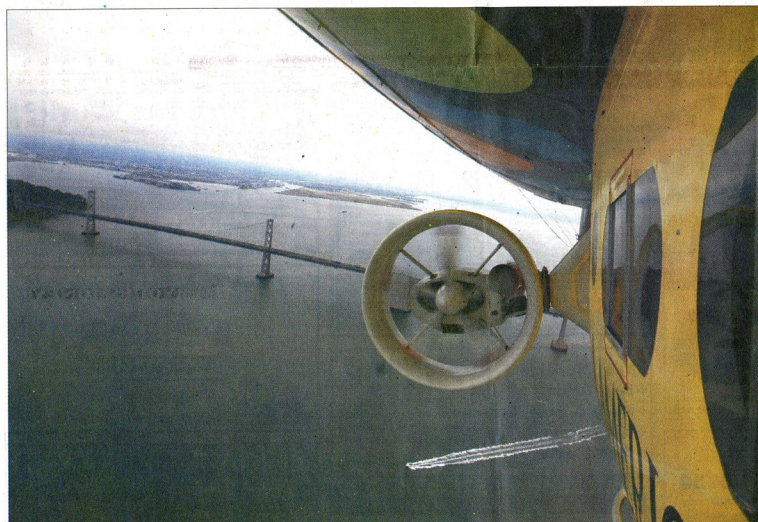


"This program was an opportunity to take an idea beyond their imagination. It's about kid power, about giving kids a sense of pride and self-esteem."



PILOTS BART VAMBEAST AND JOSE BERNAOLA (left) check out the view of San Francisco (center) from the Amerquest Soaring Dreams Airship on Thursday.

It's a bird, it's a plane — it's a work of art!



THE AMERQUEST SOARING DREAMS AIRSHIP flies near the Bay Bridge and San Francisco on Thursday. The airship was decorated by 5,000 students in after-school programs nationwide, including those at Bret Harte Elementary in Hayward. The blimp is based at Hayward Executive Airport this week to allow students to admire their work.

By Fiona Smith

STAFF WRITER

HAYWARD — No, it's not a UFO that's been appearing in the skies over Hayward for the past week — it's a funky, flying piece of public art.

During the past year, more than 5,000 children across the country — including some from the Bay Area — have painted pieces of the 40,000-square-foot canvas that was then stuck onto a blimp.

Called the Amerquest Soaring Dreams Airship, the craft has been hovering over large sporting events and public ceremonies nationwide since April. During its two-week visit to the Bay Area, the blimp is being housed at the Hayward Executive Airport.

The airship project was launched to inspire children to dream big, according to its creators, Amerquest Mortgage Company and Santa Monica-based nonprofit Portraits of Hope, whose mission is to heal people through public art. They say it is the largest airborne piece of art ever made.

"Our primary goal was to touch as many children as possible," said Julie Brandt, vice president of philanthropy for Amerquest.

Children ages 5 to 18 in after-school programs and hospitals nationwide contributed to the project. Locally, students from Bret Harte Elementary in Hayward helped paint some of the bright shapes that overlap to form an abstract collage on the airship.

"This program was an opportunity to take an idea beyond their imagination," Brandt said. "It's about kid power, about giving kids

Please see **BLIMP**, Local 2

Children's artwork is visible for miles

► **BLIMP**, from Local 1

a sense of pride and self-esteem."

Because blimps only travel a maximum of 65 mph, there is plenty of time for people on the ground to puzzle over the art project as it floats by. On its flight Thursday, a ground crew of 18 helped get the craft airborne at the Hayward airport. It climbed to 1,000 feet, slowly making its way through the blue sky above San Leandro, Oakland and San Francisco Bay.

José Bernaola, one of two pilots at the controls of the 207-foot airship, is taking it to cities all over the country through November.

"I think it's amazing. It's unique, and it gives some opportunity for the kids to come by and see what they've done to the airship," Bernaola said while taking a break from piloting. "They're pretty happy about accomplishing this."

Amerquest Mortgage Company and Portraits of Hope also



JANE TYSKA — Staff

THE AIRSHIP casts a shadow over the Southland Mall parking lot Thursday.

sponsor an essay contest for children nationwide. Contestants must write 100 words or less about what their biggest dream or goal is and how they would make it come true. Winners will get a ride for two in the

airship. Essays should be submitted by June 30 at www.soaringdreams.org.

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