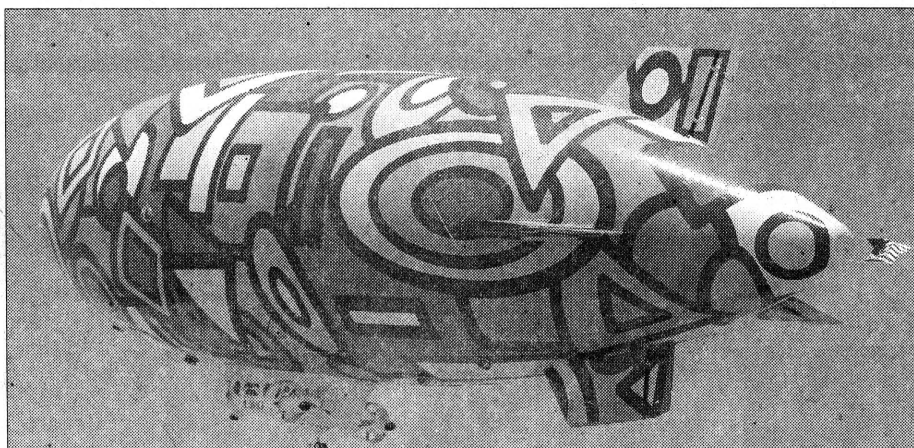


THE AMERIQUEST

Soaring
Dreams
Airship
departs
Hayward
Executive
Airport on
Thursday to
fly over the
Bay Area.

JANE TYSKA
— Staff photos



With help of 'kid power,' public art becomes airborne

■ Blimp decorated by children takes to skies over Bay Area

By Fiona Smith
STAFF WRITER

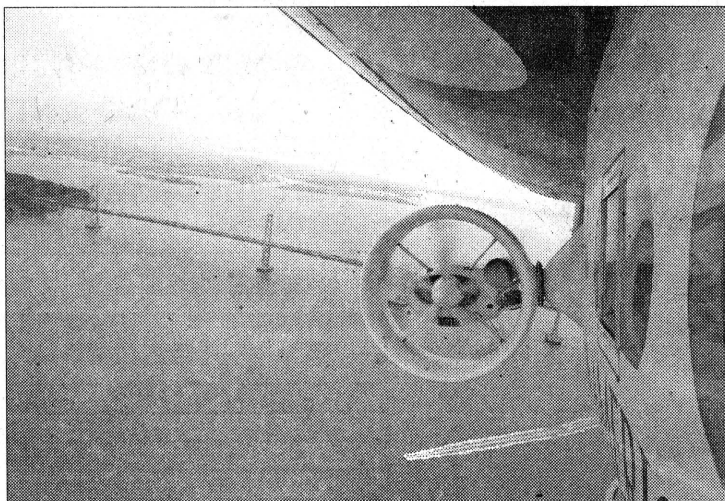
HAYWARD — It's not a UFO that's been in the skies over the East Bay recently — it's a flying piece of public art.

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 "Ameriquest 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, Ameriquest Mortgage Co. and Santa Monica-based non-profit Portraits of Hope, whose mission is to heal people through public art. They say it is the largest-ever airborne piece of art.

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



THE AMERIQUEST 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.

Children ages 5 to 18 in after-school programs and hospitals nationwide contributed to the project.

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

Because blimps travel a maximum of only 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 people helped get the craft airborne at the Hayward airport.

It climbed to 1,000 feet, slowly making its way over blue-skied San Leandro, Oakland and the Bay.

Ameriquest and Portraits of Hope also are sponsoring an essay contest for children nationwide. Contestants must write 100 words or less about their biggest dream or goal and how they would make it come true. Winners will get a ride for two in the airship. Essays should be submitted by Thursday at www.soaring-dreams.org.