

# Blair resident, balloonist inducted into Nebraska Aviation Hall of Fame

Leeanna Ellis Feb 3, 2017 Updated 7 hrs ago 0



Joe Burns

Rich Jaworski's hot air balloon flies over the horizon at sunset in Washington County in 2016.

Rich Jaworski is at home floating through the air in his hot air balloon.

"It's a different way to see the world," Jaworski said. "It's more than just a piece of equipment, it's a way of life. It's a way of helping people. It's a thing that brings joy and excitement to whoever participates."

Jaworski, a Blair resident, was inducted into the Nebraska Aviation Hall of Fame on Jan. 23 in front of more than 200 people during the Nebraska Aviation Symposium in Kearney. Three others were inducted.

"The people I was inducted with just blew me away," Jaworski said. "I felt honored to be with people of this caliber and have donated so much or jeopardized so much. It was a great experience to me and to be inducted with the people that were there."

After the ceremony, a judge for the hall of fame told Jaworski he has accomplished a lot for aviation in Nebraska.

"You have a very unique story," she told him. "You should be very proud of everything you've done, and you've certainly done all that we could expect anybody to do to make it into this hall of fame."

Jaworski is a pioneer in hot air ballooning in Nebraska. He bought his first balloon in 1972 and was the first native Nebraskan to be licensed to fly a balloon.

"I bought a balloon before I had even seen one or been in one," Jaworski said. "We just knew that we wanted to do this. Nobody around here had anything."

Jaworski trained in Muscatine, Iowa, several times over the summer that year.

With only 10 hours of flying time, he began training a co-worker who helped him purchase that first balloon.

"I think about that and how green I was," he said. "It was quite a leap forward."

Jaworski, who is a charter member and president of the Nebraska Balloon Club, taught others, including nine hot air balloon pilots living in eastern Nebraska. Four still actively fly.

Since 1972, Jaworski has gained more than 2,800 hours of flight and carried more than 7,000 passengers.

"I enjoy taking people that really need a flight," he said.

Jaworski's most memorable passengers were former World War I balloon pilots, who invited him to their reunion in 1973. Most were in their 90s.

"Those guys, as soon as they saw the balloon, they were 20 years old again," he said.

Jaworski has also set world records and won national championships with his balloons.

In 2007, Jaworski set a duration record for 23 hours, 11 minutes. The previous record was 8 hours, 25 minutes. He also set a record for distance with 280 miles.

Jaworski also captained and coached a first-place, three-balloon team at the 2007 National Hot Air Balloon Team Championships in Battle Creek, Mich.

At 74 years old, Jaworski hopes to fly until he's 80. However, he plans to cut back on how often he flies. Jaworski wants to spend more time with his four grandchildren.

Jaworski's oldest grandchild, Erich Maus, is 5. He flew with his grandpa last fall during the Washington County Heritage Days.

"He wanted to go three or four times. Every time I turned around, he was back in the basket again," Jaworski said. "That's the big thrill about flying is sharing the joy."



Blair resident Rich Jaworski poses for a photo with his plaque for the Nebraska Aviation Hall of Fame following his induction on Jan. 23 in Kearney.

Courtesy Rich Jaworski



Rich Jaworski launches a balloon for an attempt at a world record in February 2006.

Joe Burns

## Other Nebraska Aviation Hall of Fame inductees

- LaQuita J. Thompson, a female pilot who learned to fly at age 46. She became a charter pilot and instructor for Valley Airways and later flew as a corporate pilot for Mutual of Omaha, Papas Trucking, Coca-Cola, Brown Bean Co. and Western Pathology Laboratories. She served as president of her own company, Bluff Aero, Inc. at the Scotts Bluff County Airport.

- William Hamilton, who served as an aide to Gov. Charles Thone and worked to insure the Nebraska Department of Aeronautics was maintained as a cabinet-level department. He was appointed to the Nebraska Aeronautics Commission. Andersen also helped establish the Nebraska Aviation Council and Symposium.

- William Quinn, a U.S. Navy pilot who completed 31 successful reconnaissance patrols monitoring Japanese naval activity during World War II. On one patrol, the plane lost an engine and landed at Tam Quam Point in French Indochina. Quinn and the crew was later captured. Six of the men were executed. Quinn and his radioman were spared. They were freed on Sept. 5, 1945.



Rich Jaworski's hot air balloon was tethered for rides at the 2016 Washington County Heritage Festival at Fort Atkinson in Fort Calhoun.

Joe Burns