Debbra A. Spaeth

Inducted into the U.S. Ballooning Hall of Fame on July 29, 2018
By the Balloon Federation of America at the
National Balloon Museum in Indianola, Iowa

Deb’s First Balloon Flight
“Wayward Wind” 1974

Debbie Spaeth and Tom Sheppard
at 1993 FAI-CIA meeting

1986 CIA Montgolfier Diploma for
Contributions to Ballooning
With FAI President, Peter Lloyd and
Representative of Swedish Aero Club

Deb at Pilot Registration Desk
1975 Kettle Moraine Balloon Rally

Debrief, US National Hot Air Balloon
Championship, 1978 & 1979

CIA/International Ballooning Commission
Debbie Spaeth, CIA Secretary, 1988-1995

Deputy Event Director,
World Hot Air Balloon
Championship
1981 & 1985

Organizer, World HONDA Grand Prix, Round 1 in Monroe, Wisconsin, 1998-2006

CIA/International Ballooning Commission
Debbie Spaeth, CIA Secretary, 1988-1995

Deby at Pilot Registration Desk
1975 Kettle Moraine Balloon Rally
Citation for 1986 FAI/CIA Montgolfier Diploma  
Awarded in Stockholm, Sweden in September 1987  
For Services to Ballooning:  
Debbra A. Spaeth (USA)

Debbra Spaeth wrote the Observer Handbook which is now used by a number of countries, was responsible for setting up the Observer Program in the USA and developed the “A, B, C” system of qualifications for Observers.  
She helped develop the computer software for keeping track of competitors’ ranking in the Balloon Federation of America, which is now also used by England and Canada.  
She has participated in many projects involving hours of administrative work in the writing of new handbooks for each new BFA Director.

How it all began –

Sometimes life’s adventures start out in a mundane way. A summer job while Debbra A. Spaeth was in high school forever changed her life.

In the spring of 1973, the West Bend newspaper offered students the opportunity to place an ad in a “Job Needed” section that was being published. Debbie placed an ad describing her skills in office work. She was hired by a local company owned and managed by Tom Sheppard (HOF Inductee 2010). The summer job turned into an after-school job.

In April 1974, Tom invited the Spaeth family to see a “big” gathering of four balloons at the airport in Hartford, Wisconsin. From that point on, Debbie was hooked on hot air balloons.

Balloon Race Organizing and Officiating

Debbie had her first taste of balloon competition and organizing at an event in February of 1975 at the “First Kettle Moraine Balloon Rally” in West Bend, Wisconsin. Debbie helped with the event planning, pilot registration and measuring at the target. Despite the frigid winter temperatures, 16 pilots from Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan and Indiana participated in this event using the new BFA Nationals Ranking formula for the first time.

Debbie got involved in the workings of the Balloon Federation of America (BFA) Events Committee. As tasks were flown at events around the country, those results arrived in West Bend at Tom’s office as he was the BFA Scoring Manager. Calculating the task points, then the pilot average and a National Ranking list quickly become one of Deb’s jobs. To this day, Debbie can recite the formula, \[ P - N + 0.5 / P \times 1000 \], which was used to calculate the points to be awarded to the pilots.

Debbie quickly devised the most efficient way to handle the “Red Book Results” which had a green-tinted accounts columnar page for each pilot. She made a master book, her “Orange book”, with the points for tasks with (10) thru (40) pilots, and typed the (new) list each time another event was flown, necessitating an update to the National Ranking System. Deb will tell you she was very happy when the Personal Computer and Microsoft Word and Excel programs came into usage and made this job so much easier!

Early on, it became obvious that Debbie Spaeth and Tom Sheppard worked well together as a team directing and managing balloon events. By the time Tom’s original ballooning partners dropped out of the sport, Debbie was already a senior official/Scoring officer and doing much of the detail work for the balloon events they handled. Debbie organized and managed the invitations, event logistics, pilots, crews and officials for the events. The team of Sheppard & Spaeth managed balloon events from 1976 thru 2006.
Debbie and Tom Sheppard brought balloon events to a multitude of cities in the Midwest. Their company, TDS Aviation, Ltd, was known for well organized, well managed, fair competition among pilots and officials. As Debbie says, it was wonderful to introduce ballooning to another city of spectators who often turned into volunteers for crewing or measuring, which in turn created new friendships. Those locations included:

- Great Wisconsin Dells Balloon Rally 1976-1999
- Monroe Balloon Rally, Wisconsin 1985 - 2006
- Great Green Bay Balloon Race, Wisconsin 1980
- Minocqua Winter Rally, Wisconsin 1980
- Lake Geneva Balloon Rally, Wisconsin 1981-1985
- Alpine Valley, Walworth County, Wisconsin 1982
- Rockton Balloon Rally, Illinois 1983
- Annual U.S. Grant Boy Pilgrimage, Galena, Illinois 1983
- MacGregor, Iowa 1987- 1989
- Kodak Great American Balloonfest, Chicago, Kansas City & St. Louis 1988 (100 Balloons, 2 weeks)
- Freeport, Illinois 1990
- Tanager Place, Amana, Iowa 1991-1997
- Neillsville Wisconsin 1986
- Brookfield, Missouri 1984-1986

**Balloon Federation of America Committee Work**

Debbie served on the BFA Hot Air Events Committee from 1977 to 1986. Debbie's work on the Events Committee included time as the Scoring Manager and the Sanction Manager. When the BFA Events Committee transitioned from the “Hot Air Events Committee” to the “BFA Competition Division” in 1986, Debbie was a Founding Member.

The 1977 World Hot Air Balloon Championship, in York, England, was the first location to use “Observers” as competition officials. When the BFA Events Committee agreed to implement the Observer concept, Debbie Spaeth wrote the “Observer Handbook” for use at the 1978 Great Midwest Balloon Rally in Wisconsin Dells and then the 1978 US National Championship in Indianola, Iowa.

Debbie will tell you that finding people to work as Observers meant looking ‘outside the box’ as there was a need for +50 people for the Wisconsin Dells Balloon Rally and +100 people for the Nationals. This is a spot where the Spaeth Family stepped up to help. Debbie’s sister, Dawn, was the first Observer recruited, and Dawn then recruited additional volunteers from her nursing school classmates. It is safe to say that over the years, Debbie Spaeth taught hundreds of new Observers in the USA and internationally.

At the 1978 US Nationals, Debbie was the Asst. Chief Observer and a Debriefeier. However, as she remembers it, her main job was recruiting MORE Observers on a daily basis as some dropped off as the week of working in the summer humidity caused attrition. When the 1979 US Nationals began, Debbie was working with Tom as the Balloonmeister.

Debbie served as Chairperson for the BFA Operations Committee from 1983-1986. This Committee included the Pilot Achievement Award Program (PAAP), Instructor Rating Program and Records Attempt Program. During Debbie’s tenure as Chair, the PAAP was successfully launched to the BFA Memberships, with 1000 pilots completing the requirements for various levels in the PAAP during the first years. Debbie completed thru Level IV in the PAAP.

Debbie organized the original version of the BFA Director Handbook (1985), from the documents that were in cardboard boxes that were passed from president to president each term. These books brought together all the details of the BFA history and workings into one document for each Board Member.
Wisconsin Balloon Group

Debbie Spaeth is a Charter Member of the Wisconsin Balloon Group (WBG). Debbie was among the group of twelve pilots flying in Wisconsin when the WBG was formalized in 1979.

Debbie served as the WBG Executive Director from 1993 – 1996. She was WBG Social Director from 1979-1981 and did a second term from 1998-2001. She continues to serve as the Original Member Advisor for the Wisconsin Balloon Group.

In 1983, Debbie was honored by the Wisconsin Balloon Group with a Bulova mantel clock, engraved as follows:

Bicentennial of Manned Flight
Montgolfier Day 1983
Presented to Debbie Spaeth
In Appreciation for Her Contribution to
The Art of Aerostation
From her Fellow Aeronauts
Wisconsin Balloon Group

Spaeth Family Involvement in Ballooning
Growing up as one of six children, the Spaeth children all support each other in whatever endeavors were of interest – football, wrestling, track, cross-country skiing and ballooning. So it was to be expected that if one finds an interest in ballooning, others will follow.

Debbie’s siblings and parents were all involved helping with the balloon events over the years. Her siblings, Dawn, Dean, Dale, Denise and Duane, helped with measuring, observing, crewing and whatever needed to be done. As they married and had their own children, the newest generation could also be seen enjoying the balloon events.

Debbie’s parents, David & Donna, became the “faces of propane” at all TDS Aviation events. They set up the pipe system, worked as the interface with the local propane supplier, kept order in the propane line/area and efficiently refueled 25-125 balloons after each balloon flight.

The fascination with ballooning has continued thru four generations of the Spaeth Family. Nieces and nephews, who grew up attending the Great Wisconsin Dells Balloon Rally annually, now have their own children. That next generation finds balloons just as fascinating as their Aunt Debbie does.

World Championships & International Balloon Events

In 1981, the USA hosted the 5th World Hot Air Balloon Championships in Battle Creek, Michigan. Debbie Spaeth was the Asst. Event Director, working with Tom Sheppard who was the Event Director. Bruce Comstock earned the title of World Champion. The event was declared a first-class success.

Ballooning had taken hold in Battle Creek. Debbie Spaeth was the Asst. Championship Director for many events there, including the 1st North American Championship in 1983 (USA versus Canada Teams); the 7th World Hot Air Balloon Championship in 1985; and the Battle Creek International Balloon Championship from 1987-1991.

In the program for the 7th World HAB Championships, Tom Sheppard made the following comment: “I wouldn't run a championship without her”, is Championship Director Tom Sheppard’s evaluation of Debbie’s organizational ability. As Assistant Director of the World Championship, she is second in command of the Flight Operations Team, under Tom.

Her depth of knowledge on all aspects of balloon competition, her organizational ability and her skills working with people had earned Debbie respect in competition ballooning around the world. When the Japan Balloon Federation was awarded the 1989 World Hot Air Balloon Championship, to be held in
Saga, Japan, Masashi Kakuda, Event Director, came to Wisconsin to meet with Debbie and Tom Sheppard.

As a result of that meeting, Debbie arranged for the Japanese staff for the Saga Worlds, those who would fill the Senior Official positions, to attend the 1987 and 1988 Battle Creek International Balloon Championship (BCHABC). During those BCHABC events, each Japanese official did a “job shadow” of the person in their field; Chief Scorer, Chief Debriefie, Chief Observer, etc. For the 1989 World Hot Air Balloon Championship in Saga, Japan, Masashi chose Debbie as his Asst. Championship Director. Masashi and Debbie continued this working relationship at balloon events in Japan until his death in 2006.

Debbie also worked with Masashi Kakuda when he established the HONDA World Grand Prix series of premier balloon competition held in three cities in different countries – Monroe, Wisconsin; Echternach, Luxembourg; and Motegi, Japan. This series of competitions drew the best pilots from around the world and ran from 1998 thru 2006. Debbie recruited the USA location where she and Tom had been running a weekend event. She also worked as the Asst. Event Director with Masashi in the Motegi, Japan Grand Prix location.

Debbie worked as the Scoring Officer for many events in Canada. This included the Canadian National Championships in Barrie, Ontario and Kamloops, British Columbia, as well as the North American Championship and the Pacific Championship, both held in Grand Prairie, Alberta. For many years, Debbie was also on the competition staff at the International Balloon Festival held in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec.

At the 1988 CIA Plenary meeting in Montreal, Canada, Debbie Spaeth was elected CIA Secretary General. She was the first woman to serve on the CIA Bureau. Debbie was CIA Secretary General until 1995.

During her term as CIA Secretary, Debbie made it her project to review the CIA minutes to find all the motions passed as CIA Policy as recorded in the minutes of the first CIA meeting in 1969 to the 1991 minutes. She then collected those motions and published the “CIA Policy Manual” so each delegate had the historical perspective on topics like Rules, Use of Turning Vents, Semi-Proportional Representation, etc.

Debbie was also active on the following committees:

CIA Observer Sub-Committee – Helped create the Observer’s Glossary to help non-English speaking Observers feel comfortable with balloon competition terminology.

CIA Safety Sub-Committee – Helped with establishing the international safety officer’s guidelines, much of it based on the work done by the BFA Events Committee.

CIA Jury – Debbie is a Senior Level Juror, which qualifies her to serve as Jury President at all levels of balloon competitions for Hot Air Balloons, Gas Balloons and Hot Air Airships.

CIA Public Media & Relations Sub-Committee – Member since 2016. Chair 2018. Create Media stories for publication on FAI/CIA Web site. Interact with Media liaisons for CIA Sanctioned Events.

Sharing knowledge = Caring about the Sport

Over her balloon career, Debbie has generously shared her accumulated knowledge of the many aspects of ballooning. This includes Speaking at Safety Seminars on topics related to Balloon Competition, including organizing events, Scoring Officer duties, Training Observers, Understanding balloon competition.
As GPS technology became a factor in balloon competition, Debbie organized a seminar “Using GPS in Balloon Competition” in April 1996 in West Bend. At the end of the day, the officials, observers and pilots who attended had a much better understanding of how the technology works and how it could be used in balloon flights and competition.

Debbie was the organizer and a speaker for a seminar, “Balloon Competition Officials”, held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1990 and in 1991. The speakers for the event included Tom Sheppard, Gary Britton, Jim Birk, and Debbie Spaeth. This covered the spectrum of duties and details related to Event Director, Safety Officer, Scoring Officer and Event Organizing. Attendees came from across the USA. At the end of the weekend, 38 attendees volunteered to help at events across the country.

Giving someone their first balloon ride has always been a special moment for Debbie as well as for the passenger. From family members to the sponsor ride at a balloon event, Debbie was happy to share the experience of balloon flight. She definitely agrees with the sponsor/rider who kept repeating “This is way cool!” during his first ride.

Most important to Debbie has been the friendships ballooning have brought to her. When Debbie was awarded the Montgolfier Diploma in 1987, she did not plan to attend the ceremony in Sweden due to the cost of the airline ticket. But Rockford, Illinois pilot, Bill O'Donnell, rallied ballooning friends to raise the funds for the airline ticket so Debbie could attend the Awards ceremony. The comments and congratulations from the +60 pilots and officials who contributed were touching. They included:

“This is a once in a lifetime event for Debbie, only to be made more special by such a gesture as this.”

“Few deserve this award for service more than Debbie. Over the years Tucker and I have benefitted from much of her work, so we are happy to have this opportunity to help her get to Sweden to receive the recognition she deserves.”

“How wonderful for Debbie and well deserved.”

“We’re delighted that Debbie has been chosen to receive the Montgolfier Diploma this year. Mr. Forbes has asked that I forward the enclosed check to help towards her airfare.”

If not for placing an ad for “Summer Job Needed” in the local newspaper, it is likely life would have been a much different path for Debbra A. Spaeth. She considers that a lucky day.

**Summary of Debbra A Spaeth Ballooning Activities & Honors**

**Pilot Ratings:**
- Private Hot Air Balloon 1978
- Commercial Hot Air Balloon 1979

**Memberships**
- Wisconsin Balloon Group -Charter Member 1979
- Balloon Federation of America since 1974 – Life Member

**Event Director** –
- 1991 Rocvale Balloon Rally, Rockford, IL
- 1989 Monroe (WI) Balloon Rally
- 1985 Lake Geneva (WI) Balloon Rally

1988 Saga, Japan
Deputy Event Director –
- World Hot Air Balloon Championship, Tochigi, Japan (2006):
- World Hot Air Balloon Championship, Saga, Japan (1989 & 1997)
- World Hot Air Balloon Championship, Battle Creek, MI (1981 & 1985)
- Tochigi (Japan) International Balloon Championship (2007-2014)
- Mildura (Australia) International Championship – 1995
- Saga (Japan) International Balloon Fiesta, 1990-1998
- Battle Creek (USA) International HAB Championship, 1987-1991
- 1988 Kodak Olympic Balloon Festival in Calgary, Canada
- US Hot Air Balloon National Championship (1979)
- Asst. to Competition Director – 1991 European Airship Championship, Luxembourg
- North American HAB Championship, Barrie, Ontario, Canada 1986
- North American HAB Championship, Battle Creek MI USA 1983

Organizer & Operations Director –
- Monroe Balloon Rally, Monroe, WI USA 1986-2006
- Great Wisconsin Dells Balloon Rally (+90 Balloons) 1975-1999
- 1988 Kodak Great American Balloon Fest – 100th Anniversary of the Snapshot - Held over two week period in 3 Cities- Chicago-Kansas City-St. Louis (100 Balloons)
- Organized over 120 Weekend Balloon Events from 1975 thru 2006, Rocvale, Balloon Rally, Amana Colonies Balloon Rally and other events around the Midwest and across the USA.

Chief Scorer–
- 2008 Canadian National HAB Championship, Grand Prairie, Alberta, Canada
- 2004 Canadian National HAB Championship, Kamloops CB Canada
- 5th World Gas Balloon Championship, Albuquerque, NM 1994
- 1992 Pacific HAB Championship, Grand Prairie, Alberta, Canada
- 6th World Gas Balloon Championship w/1st World Rozier Championship, Tyndall SD 1990
- Scoring Auditor, US National HAB Championship, Baton Rouge LA 1988
- Scoring Manager, BFA Gas Balloon Division, 1989-1993

Steward –
- 2017 Saga International Balloon Championship, Japan
- 2016 World Hot Air Balloon Championship, Saga, Japan
- 2015 Saga International Balloon Championship, Japan

Debriefer –
- 7th World Gas Balloon Championship, Obertraun, Austria 1992
- 5th World HAB Championship, Stubenberg, Austria 1987
- Saga (Japan) International Balloon Fiesta 1987, 1988

Asst. Chief Observer –
- US National HAB Championship, Indianola Iowa 1978

Jury Member/President –
- Battle Creek International Championship, 1997-1999 & 2001-2004
- World Cup/Pre-World Air Games Events, Spain 2000
- World Hot Air Airship Championship, Gatineau, Canada 1998
- America’s Challenge Gas Balloon Race, Albuquerque, NM 1995
- North American HAB Championship, Brockville, Ontario, Canada 1994
- US National HAB Championship, Baton Rouge LA 1989
- Saga (Japan) International Balloon Championship 1986
- North American HAB Championship, Grand Prairie Alta Canada 1984

Special Events where Debbie Flew:
- 1979 Aurorafest, Aurora, Illinois – 2nd place finish
- 1980 Winter Olympics, Lake Placid, New York
- 1986 Chateau de Balleroy Forbes Balloon Weekend, France
- 1987 Saga International Balloon Fiesta, Japan
- 2001 Sint-Niklaas International Balloon Fiesta, Belgium
- 2003-2008 Hartford (WI) Balloon Rally

Awards & Honors:
- Annie Pryne Memorial Award – In recognition of your commitment & dedication to the Observer Corp & Competition Ballooning in the true “Spirit of Annie” (2015)
- NABA Albert Desmond Memorial Award- in Recognition & Appreciation for outstanding Contributions to hot air balloon competition. (2003)
- Japan Balloon Federation Medal of Appreciation (1993)
- FAI Air Sports Medal of Appreciation #35 (1992)
- FAI Montgolfier Diploma- for Contributions to the development of the Sport of Ballooning (1986)
- Highest Award by International Ballooning Commission (CIA)
- BFA Shields-Trauger Memorial Award for Exemplary Service to the BFA (1984)
- Highest Award by Balloon Federation of America
- BFA Directors Award – 1995, 2012

Community Volunteer
- Walk to End Alzheimer’s; Team Captain – Team has raised over $68,000 for research since 2003
- Co-Chair Washington County Walk to End Alzheimer’s since 2015
- PACE (Business & Professional Women’s Organization) Board Member, Membership Chair & Scholarship Committee (12 years)
- Lac Lawrann Conservancy, West Bend WI – Co-Chair Fall Fundraiser Concert (4 years)

Education
- Masters – Business Administration – Marquette University
- Bachelor of Business Administration - Marketing Major – UW-Milwaukee

Professional

Awards 1985 World Hot Air Balloon Championship, Battle Creek, Michigan

Spaeth Family @ 1994 Wisconsin Dells Rally