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U. S. BALLOONING HALL OF FAME INDUCTION CEREMONY



Scott Appelman – A Legacy of Leadership in Commercial Ballooning

Scott Appelman is a pioneer of commercial hot air ballooning whose leadership has shaped not only the industry in Albuquerque, but throughout the United States for more than four decades. Born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Scott grew up in a family of entrepreneurs where hard work was a way of life. Rather than following a traditional path, he was drawn to hot air ballooning—not merely as a sport, but as a professional and scalable experience that could be shared with the public.



Scott in the shop of his Albuquerque office.

Building an Industry Leader

In 1983, Scott earned his Commercial Pilot License for Lighter-Than-Air aircraft and founded Rainbow Ryders, Inc. What began as a bold entrepreneurial vision evolved into the largest commercial hot air balloon company in the United States. Today, Rainbow Ryders operates year-round with full-time bases in New Mexico, Arizona, and seasonal operations in Colorado and Utah. The company operates a fleet of over forty balloons, conducts more than 4,000 flights annually, and safely flies over 45,000 passengers each year with a workforce of hundreds.



Scott in one of his first official Rainbow Ryders' balloons and chase vehicle.

Under Scott's leadership, Rainbow Ryders expanded far beyond passenger rides. The company became a leader in corporate promotions, branded and special shape balloon operations, instruction, tether operations, and large-scale event management. Rainbow Ryders has flown across the United States and managed balloon ride event operations in locations including Albuquerque, Phoenix, Colorado Springs, Bentonville (Arkansas), Chihuahua (Mexico), and Guadalajara (Mexico).

Since 1999, Rainbow Ryders has proudly served as the Official Hot Air Balloon Ride Concessionaire for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta®, safely introducing hundreds of thousands of guests to flight and helping define the professional standards for commercial balloon operations at major events.

Aviation Experience & Technical Expertise

Scott accumulated more than 6,000 pilot-in-command flight hours, including over 800 tether hours, and was certified as a special shape balloon pilot. His extensive flight experience, combined with strong operational discipline, helped establish industry benchmarks for safety, training, and guest experience. He is also a world record holder for an altitude flight.

Corporate Partnerships & Media Presence

Scott was instrumental in integrating ballooning into corporate branding and national media. Rainbow Ryders has operated promotional balloons for major organizations including Heineken USA, Xfinity, Intel Corporation, Phillips 66, General Mills, Ocean Spray Cranberries, Gateway Computers, Meow Wolf, KOB-TV4, Swire Coca Cola, Fidelity, Pinnacle Propane, Visit Albuquerque, Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, Duke City Redi Mix, New Mexico True and numerous universities, municipalities, and cultural institutions.

Scott's personality and passion made him a natural ambassador for the sport. He served as the Dos Equis "World's Most Interesting Balloon Pilot" Ambassador of Adventure and piloted for Good Morning America's "Tour of the Southwest," bringing the magic of ballooning to national audiences.



Scott checking the lines inside the Dos Equis corporate balloon.

Shaping the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta

A central figure in the evolution of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta®, Scott served on its Board of Directors from 1986 to 1991. He originated and organized several of the event's most iconic features, including the Balloon Glow (1987–1992), Albuquerque Aloft, and the Wells Fargo Special Shape Rodeo (1989). He also played a key role in sponsor recruitment efforts that helped ensure the long-term success of the Fiesta.

Leadership in Tourism & Economic Development

Beyond ballooning, Scott was a tireless advocate for tourism and destination marketing. He served on the Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors from 1993 to 2010, including roles as Chairman of the Board (2001–2002) and Chairman of the Marketing Committee (1996–1997). His work helped position Albuquerque as a premier destination for aviation, events, and experiential tourism.

Following Rainbow Ryders' expansion into Arizona, Scott continued his destination leadership by serving on the Experience Scottsdale Board of Directors beginning in 2020.

Event Production & Community Leadership

Scott's impact extended into large-scale event production through his role as Managing Partner of Hot Apple Productions alongside his wife and partner Heather. Since 2015, he has helped produce the Colorado Springs Labor Day Lift Off, an event featuring more than 80 balloons and attracting over 250,000 spectators annually.

Committed to safety, competition, and mentorship, Scott served as President, Balloonmeister, and Safety Officer of Top Gun, Inc., a New Mexico competitive hot air balloon club, from 1988 to 1994. He was also a competitor in the U.S. National Hot Air Balloon Championship and organizer of major rallies including the Hands Across America Balloon Rally in 1985 and the Hands Across New Mexico initiative.



Scott posed for a news article announcing his expansion into his second market in 2010, Phoenix, Arizona.

Honors & Legacy

Scott Appelman's contributions to ballooning, tourism, and aviation have earned him numerous honors, including induction into the State of New Mexico Tourism Hall of Fame and the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta® Hall of Fame.

His legacy is not measured solely in flight hours, records, or events, but in the pilots he mentored, the operational standards he established, and the unforgettable experiences he created for generations of guests. Scott Appelman transformed hot air ballooning into a sustainable, world-class commercial enterprise and helped elevate it into a globally recognized symbol of adventure, celebration, and wonder.

Life Outside of Ballooning

Scott married his wife, Heather, in 2013, and together they raised a blended family: children Ryan, Nicole, Journee, Phoebe, and Halle, while continuing to grow and strengthen the legacy of Rainbow Ryders and Hot Apple Productions into the industry powerhouses they are today. Scott approached fatherhood and partnership with the same steady leadership that defined his professional life. Family was never separate from his work; it was the foundation of it. His daughter, Nicole, and son, Ryan, were the ones who actually coined the name of Rainbow Ryders.



Scott's wedding photo to Heather in 2013.

Scott believed deeply in the idea of “family” in all its forms. He took great pride not only in his home life, but also in the extended family he created through Rainbow Ryders and Hot Apple Productions. To him, the pilots, crew, staff, and partners who worked alongside him were more than colleagues—they were people he cared for, invested in, and stood behind.

His family and work family were his greatest priority and his driving force. Every milestone achieved, every challenge overcome, and every vision realized was guided by his desire to build something lasting for the people he loved.



Scott front and center with his Rainbow Ryders' family, celebrating the 40th anniversary of Rainbow Ryders in 2023.

Confirmed Awards & Honors

1. Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta Hall of Fame — inducted in 2017.
2. Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta Heritage Award — received in 2013.
3. Tourism Hall of Fame Award (from the Tourism Association of America) — recognizing his impact on tourism.
4. Dos Equis Ambassador of Adventure, “World’s Most Interesting Balloon Pilot”

We would like to thank the family of Scott Appelman and Rainbow Riders for providing information for this brochure.