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## QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning to honor victims, families of Paramus school bus crash

Alexandra Antonucci, Editorial Intern



*The USA Today Network has selected the balloon festival as the premier family entertainment attraction in the state for 2018.*

READINGTON - Spirits will be lifted along with the balloons at the 36th annual QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning later this month, as the festival is providing free tickets to those affected by the school bus crash involving students from East Brook Middle School in Paramus.

The motivation behind this came from Russ Mensch, who serves as the media director for the festival. A Paramus native and East Brook Middle School graduate, the tragedy hits close to home for him.

"Any time there is news involving something happening at a school, you have thoughts about could it happen to where you live," Mensch said. "This did. It was my school in the town I grew up in. We hope a day out at the festival can provide a positive, memorable experience for the students, families and teachers."

While the families, teachers and students are specifically invited to opening day of the ceremony, the tickets can be used for any day. As of right now, the school is leaving it up to the families to decide when they'd like to attend.

East Brook Middle School principal Thomas LoBue described the gesture as "extremely generous and thoughtful."

"We had some things that have happened over the past few weeks and the outpouring of kindness has been overwhelming," LoBue said. "Our kids and families are certainly looking forward to it, we've been trying to encourage them to smile and have some fun, because you know, they're kids."

On May 17, a school bus carrying fifth-grade students from East Brook Middle School collided with a dump truck on Route 80 after driver Hudy Muldrow Sr. made an illegal U-Turn onto the busy highway. Teacher Jennifer Williamson-Kennedy and student Miranda Vargas were killed in the crash, and 43 others were injured, some critically.



*Members of the East Brook Middle School community have been invited to the balloon festival in the wake of the recent tragedy. (Photo: QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning)*

Following the crash has been an ongoing investigation, as a grieving school community raises questions, the main one being why Muldrow was allowed to get behind the wheel of a school bus with 14 license suspensions and eight speeding tickets on his driving record. The Paramus school district is implementing three-point seat belts in all of their school buses, and a piece of legislation known as "Miranda's Law" has been introduced and is being considered.

Under Miranda's Law, named after the 10-year-old victim of the crash, school districts and bus companies will be notified of changes to bus driver's records.

Understanding that grief is an ongoing process, the balloon festival is hoping to give families a day out, one that will hopefully "help with the direct healing process of those involved," according to Mensch.

This is not the first time that the festival has given solace to schools in need. After a fire destroyed James Monroe School in Edison in 2014, fifth-grade student [Gabby Martini's award-winning essay](#) about "What the American Flag Means to Me," was submitted to the PNC American Patriot Essay Contest. The bank, which is one of the sponsors of the event, gave away approximately 25 tickets to displaced students and faculty members. Martini received a free hot air balloon with two of her teachers.

This year's festival, July 27 to 29 at Solberg Airport, features 100 sport and special shaped hot air balloons taking flight twice each day over the Hunterdon County countryside. Family-oriented entertainment and attractions include a live concert series, a fireworks display, a nighttime hot air balloon glow, World Record human cannonball David "The Bullet" Smith, the Running with the Balloons 5K, children's amusement rides and entertainment, hundreds of crafters and vendors and a variety of dining options.

To support the Paramus Community, visit <http://paramuschildrenshealth.org/pch/> for more information. Balloon Festival tickets can be purchased at [balloonfestival.com](http://balloonfestival.com).