



PHOTOGRAPHS: CATHERINE CARP

The WACKOS World of Kites

Members of this Charlotte-area kite club enjoy shooting the breeze almost as much as catching it.



Pokémon fan James Martin flies the Pikachu kite his father, Jim, made for him. The 10-year-old also owns a miniature kite that's traveled with him all around the world.

The morning starts off chilly but soon transforms into a shorts and short-sleeved shirt affair. Passing clouds occasionally threaten, but not even a whisper of a breeze blows through this wide-open field at Frank Liske Park near Harrisburg.

A band of people clusters around a fluttering display of towering multihued banners. With practiced hands, they zip open golf club-size bags and remove riotously colored swaths of ripstop nylon and strong-corded strings. The sound of comfortable chatter fills the air as these close friends expertly smooth out kinks in their kites. The skies, however, remain quiet and still.

The Wacky Pack

The gathering is one of the kite-flying events held by WACKOS, the Wings

Across Carolina Kiting and Okra Society. Founding members Jim Martin and Marty Groet first settled on the acronym, then filled in the blanks when they formed this no-rules, no-dues Charlotte-area club. "The word 'organization' implied we were going to be organized," jokes Jim about why they rejected the obvious "o." Instead, they decided to honor okra.

WACKOS regulars include a political consultant (Jim Martin), a retired computer programmer (Marty Groet), a truck driver (Grumpy Gwyn), a psychologist (Sandra Boward), a hand engraver and personal chef (Reid Smith), a machinist (Stuart Crum), an information technology executive (Jim Podlasek), and a software engineer (Laura Podlasek). A pure and abiding love for kite flying remains their common denominator. ▶



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It Takes All Kinds

"In the WACKOS, we fly a little bit of everything," says Jim Martin. The main distinction among kites involves how many lines, or strings, each kite possesses—typically one, two, or four lines. The number of lines dictates the kite's capability—whether it's meant to soar gracefully as an object of beauty or is destined to dive, loop, and perform other tricks. Fighter kites are made to wage air attacks against other kites by cutting opponents' lines or knocking kites to the ground.

Kites come in an array of designs and boast many kinds of attachments. "We hang wind socks and stuff on the string and call that line laundry, air pollution, or sky junk," says Jim.

Many of the WACKOS enjoy the peacefulness of single-line, traditional kite flying. Take Grumpy, for instance, who hauls his enormous kite collection in his truck. For him, the bigger, the better. "Flying kites is a way to attract attention, but not be outlandish, boisterous, or obnoxious," he says. Others relish the chance to master maneuvers. Stuart, for example, loves trick flying. "I'm into anything with wings," he says. "I've also flown hang gliders and sailplanes."

For psychologist Sandra, it's not the number of kites you own, but the experience that matters. "Kiting is a celebration of friends, family, nature, and creativity," she says.

Marty agrees. "If everybody in the world picked up a kite today, I don't think we'd have any more wars," he says. "Everybody would be too busy smiling. There's something about the kite taking off in your hands and the wind pulling the string through your fingers. You're harnessing something."

Well, sometimes. And other times, the fickle wind simply refuses to show up.

High Jinks and Hilarity

Even on windless days like today, the WACKOS faithful remain philosophical. "Kite flying is a test of perseverance," Stuart says. "Sometimes you set up like this and nothing happens. So then we just talk and talk and talk."

A conversation among WACKOS promises almost as much entertainment as the kite flying itself. "For the longest time, I was the only female flyer," says Sandra. "And just like boys in grade school who dip the girls' pigtails in ink, the guys teased me."

Jim Martin gleefully admits, "We call her 'the wind-killer.' We tell her that every time she drives up, the wind stops. What we don't tell her is it usually has stopped long before she arrived."

Jim and Laura Podlasek, who moved to Charlotte from Nebraska last spring, love to share how kites brought them together. "Laura and I met at The Wayne Chicken Show, which includes the Cluck-Off Contest," Jim recalls. "I was a member of a group that did exhibition kite flying." The Cluck-Off, he says, "is a bunch of people who imitate



Marty Groet makes many of his own kites, including this green version named Envious. "You never know if it's going to fly until you get out in the field," he says. A lifetime enthusiast, Marty often carries kites in his truck for impromptu flying.

joining wackos

"We're a pretty loosely organized bunch, and we try to keep it that way," advises the club's Web site. The group usually meets the first and third Saturday of the month year-round at Frank Liske Park just outside of Harrisburg. Members occasionally meet at Mint Hill Park on Fairview Road just east of State 51. Member perks include a self-imposed title. "Everybody gets to be an officer, but the officers have no power or authority," Jim Martin explains. "They also have no responsibilities."

Anyone can join "if they're not too embarrassed to be seen with us," says Jim. Adds Marty Groet, "If you want to be a WACKO, fine. Just tell yourself, 'I'm a WACKO.' Of course, if you do that publicly, you could get into trouble." For more information visit their Web site at www.wackos.org.



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above: Every WACKOS gathering includes an opportunity for eating okra.
below: Jim Podlasek (left) shows off his patriotic pride while Jim Martin reveals his allegiance to the Carolina Panthers.

chickens and roosters. The winners are on David Letterman and Jay Leno." Besides paving the way for the couple's eventual WACKOS status, the event heralded their matrimonial bliss. "I proposed to her five years to the day at the same festival," he says.

To Run or Not To Run

New kite designs capture the wind so efficiently, leg power isn't required except when flying stunt and fighter kites. "If you run, there's either something wrong with the kite or something wrong with you," Marty says.

"Or something wrong with the wind," Jim Martin chimes in.

Pat, Jim's wife, adds, "I don't think anybody in this group runs, although I have seen them run if something bad is about to happen to one of their kites."

Once, something bad did happen to one of Sandra's kites, but running didn't help. "We were doing a red, white, and blue mass ascension," she explains. She had proudly brought out her new \$150 patriotic kite, sporting neat Mylar tails and other spiffy "space junk." The kite was a vision to behold—but not to be held.

"It was just too strong a wind, and it pulled up the stake and the kite just kept going," she recalls. "I just stood there and watched it go...and go...



"Kiting is a celebration of friends, family, nature, and creativity."

Sandra Boward

and go. It didn't stop or come down, and there was a tear in my eye."

Stuart adds, "I imagine some 10-year-old is probably thinking it's his early Christmas present by now."

"But you know," Sandra says, "I wasn't too upset about it. That's the joy of the wind. That's just part of kiting. You don't try to pin down the wind; you work with it. It's just one of those moments where the wind was in charge."

It's Not Nice To Fool Mother Nature

So far, the wind today has definitely shown who is boss. "You have to target your prayers very specifically," Jim Martin says. "Wind, definitely

yes; lightning and rain, definitely no."

Just then a soothing breeze drifts in softly. "We're getting a little wind," Sandra calls to everyone excitedly. "The wind, the wind, the wind," she chants delightedly as she hurriedly scoops up her kite.

"Everybody pick a kite, and let's give this a shot," Jim yells. All around, colorful kites lift and float effortlessly in the sky high above. The field of WACKOS grows uncharacteristically silent except for the rustling of the wind.

Later, when the gusts again steal quietly away, Sandra announces to no one in particular, "Was that not a glorious few moments in the air?"

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON



now, about that okra...

"We are not all obsessed with okra," Marty Groet says. "Kite flyers are never obsessed with *anything*. But we do carry okra to ridiculous extremes."

Some members confess they don't even particularly like the vegetable. "You don't *have* to like it," says Sandra Boward, who has pickled okra for club members. "You just have to be willing to at least try it."

Stuart Crum jokes, "The hot okra pickles are for the hotshots with the dual lines and the mild ones are for the single-liners."

"But you're a single-line flyer," Marty retorts, referring to the single-line kite that club members bought for Stuart, known as a dual-line diehard.

"I'm a single-line owner," Stuart replies.



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