

Pop Culture

Super-talented "twisters" are blowing up all over the Valley.

By Jimmy Magahern

Sitting down can be tricky for JoAnn Gray. She's also got to be on constant lookout for little boys with pins.

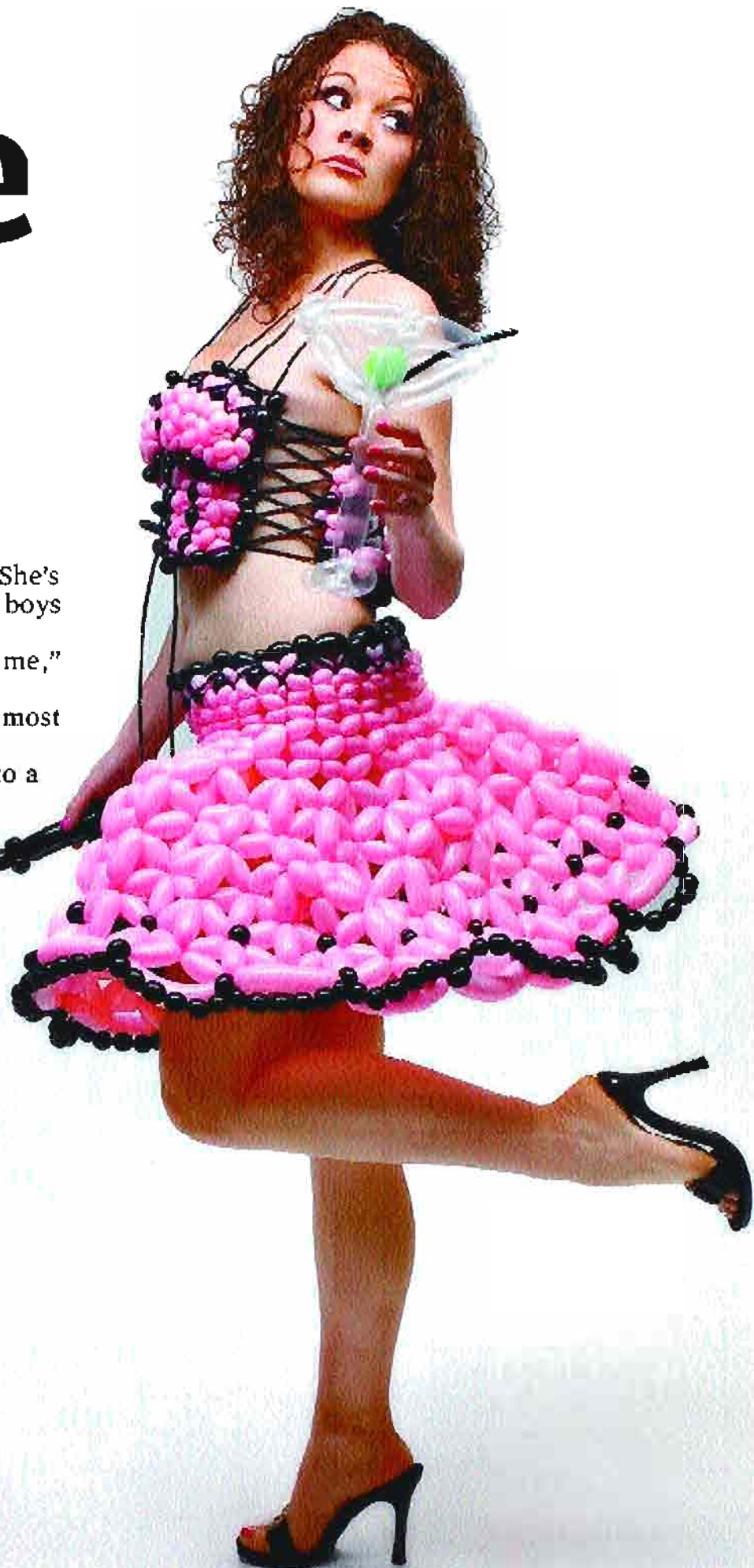
"Usually, I'll have someone walking behind me," she says, "just to make sure nothing happens."

Such are the hazards when you're the world's most in-demand model of elegant balloon wear.

"It started when I was getting ready to go to a convention here last year, and I didn't have anything to wear," explains the pretty 21-year-old brunette from Mesa, who fit her statuesque 5'9" frame into an inflatable Victoria's Secret-style number for a photo shoot at a downtown Phoenix studio.

"I wanted to stand out, but I didn't want to look stupid, dressing up when nobody else was. So I got together with some people, and we decided it'd be cool if I wore a balloon dress."

It helped that the convention Gray was attending was Diamond Jam, one of the four largest annual conventions of serious balloon artists in the world. At big balloon fests like the D-Jam — which holds its second annual four-day, uh, blowout at the Mesa Holiday Inn next weekend, an event open to the public — a growing subculture of adventurous "twisters," as they call themselves, puff,



of half-inch balls and bending the group back into the longer section making up the shaft, Chee says the gap between amateur and professional balloon art has gotten to where it's like "the difference between buying a print at Wal-Mart or a Picasso original. The problem is, people are not appreciating the difference in value yet."

To pop the public perception of just what can be done today with balloons — and to give the growing worldwide community of twisters a place to meet one another and share tips and tricks — Chee began organizing the Diamond Jam conventions, first as an offshoot of the larger Clownarama in 2004, and the following year as its own specialized event.

Along with contests in Belgium, Japan and one in Austin, Chee's Diamond Jam is already recognized as one of the main events of the global twister community. For this year's affair, Chee is bringing in 10 of the world's top twisting instructors, drawing talent from the U.K., Netherlands, France, Canada and the U.S.

"Every country has its own style of twisting," says Chee, the current world champ in the "detailed artistic" category, whose own work blends the precision miniaturist style associated with twisters of his Asian heritage with an American flair for whimsy. "In Belgium, they're really wild."

To kick things up a notch, Chee's also offering a \$5,000 prize to the winner of the "anything goes" competition — the largest purse ever offered at a balloon contest, he says.

"My big thing is I'd like to see twisting move up more as an art form," he says. "And the way to do that is give exposure to the people willing to stretch new ideas, if you will, way beyond people's expectations."

Already, there are legends within the twister culture. David Grist, an English twister who died of a heart attack last January, is renowned as an innovator whose most famous creation, a wearable Model T car, is often saluted at conventions in homages fashioned by devotees of his nine instructional DVDs. Provo, Utah's Marvin Hardy, scheduled to speak at Diamond Jam, is another icon; his book *Balloon Magic*, with more than three million copies in print, has been studied, Chee says, by easily 95 percent of the people twisting today.

Chee, who supplements his income by producing twisting DVDs himself, says twisting has only recently reached its creative peak, and credits the surge to a combination of advances in balloon manufacturing ("The color palette is there now; before, you only had 10 colors") and the synergy of twisters seeing each other's work, via the Internet, DVDs and the conventions, and sharing their own unique touches and techniques.

"The skill level has gone up like crazy," he says. "But there's still these guys out there who are promulgating the myth that it's all just simple dogs and swords."

Pulling a few vibrantly colored balloons from the 4,000 stuffed into his apron — "I go through 20,000 balloons

a month," he says — Chee spends about seven minutes blowing and twisting multiple balloons into what eventually emerges as a Disney-worthy princess, complete with a fetching painted-on face and overinflated cleavage heaving out over her light-blue dress. "I live in Scottsdale," he quips. "That's all I ever see!"

Across the Starbucks, a well-dressed woman eyes Chee's creation and approaches him to ask for a business

And then there are newcomers like Marie Dadow, a transplanted California girl who only picked up twisting a little more than a year ago and has already nabbed the coveted Ralph Dewey Balloon Excellence Award, one of the highest honors in the balloon-twisting world.

"A lot of the old-school people gave me flak when I started getting recognition, because they said I came along after all the twisting innovations,"

and then I add something to make it my own." And she acknowledges that some innovations — like Californian Ken Stillman's bright idea of using an over-inflated heart-shaped balloon to create the dimpled chin of a cartoon superhero — clearly bear the indelible mark of their creator.

"There are some things where we all know where it comes from," Dadow says. "But how far back do you have to go? I mean, there's only so many ways



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card, tentatively booking him for an upcoming party at Anthem. Chee winks and says that's the only way the more advanced twisters can draw in people willing to pay the extra hundred dollars or so over the average clown's going rate.

"You can't pick out a twister from the phone book," he says. "But when you're out working in a restaurant and people get to see for themselves what your capabilities are, that's what sells them."

"Most people are blown away," he adds, smiling at the intentional pun, "when they see something really phenomenal done with balloons."

There are old men who come to the IHOP jams who've been twisting balloons for decades, and are confounded by the wild stuff the younger twisters are making today.

"These guys are way above me in the things that they do," admits an 82-year-old who goes by the name Feathers the Clown, and who still works weekend mornings at the same IHOP that hosts the jams. "I do enough just to get a smile out of 'em."

Dadow says. "Like, they didn't have all these colors to work with when they were starting out. Or there weren't all these established techniques. But hey, it's not my fault I got into this at the best possible time!"

More than most of the artists in the Valley twister community, which Chee numbers at about 60, Dadow is acutely tuned in to the weird politics and business dealings that go on among what appears on the surface to be a perpetually happy, easygoing bunch.

"Who gets credit for what is very big in these circles," she reveals, noting that artists will try to claim ownership of a design by being the first to include it in an instructional video or in a photo posted on BalloonHQ.com.

"I made a butterfly where I took Don Caldwell's basic design, and Jeanine [Von Essen]'s way that she makes her weave on the wings, and Patricia Bunnell's way that she crimps the wings," she says, dropping some notable names. "And a friend of mine came over and said, 'Oh, you're doing Wally's butterfly!'"

Dadow admits she usually starts a creation by copying something she's seen before. "I try it one or two times,

you can make something with balloons. If you get people all around the world trying to make the latest kids' movie character, you're gonna have some similarities. Right?"

Dadow takes a deep breath, and apologizes for exposing the dark underbelly of the shiny, happy balloon crowd.

"Really, I love the balloons," she insists. "I just hate all the other stuff that goes on around them — having to give credit to the right person, and all the squabbles that go on. Sometimes I feel, 'Oh, you guys are killing me! Can't we just get back to playing with balloons?'"

W You gotta meet J.P.," Marie Dadow says, flagging down an older fellow with a loud Hawaiian shirt and an even louder laugh that's been resonating throughout the IHOP all night. "J.P.'s a hoot and a half."

Dadow admits that when she first met J.P. Weigt, a retiree who got into twisting to be "the cool grandpa" and soon discovered he loved hanging out with the balloon crowd, she was a bit taken aback by his boisterous, over-the-top manner and his decidedly un-PC

request that comes in," he says. "You name it, I'll make it."

At work at his regular gig, the Sunday morning shift at another IHOP in Chandler, Vincent says he never looks at his tips, even though tips are all you get working the restaurants, still the twister's primary venue.

"When someone gives me something, I just put it in my pocket, and I won't even know what I've made until I leave," he says. "That way I'm not thinking about the money."

Vincent is all about the "shock and

and caricature artist Roger Johnston, has always had the unique gift of "thinking in balloons," his dad says.

"I'd ask him to draw something, and he'd say, 'Dad, I can't draw it, but I can make it with balloons.'"

The younger Johnston is a quiet genius, tossing in a clever quip only occasionally between the clatter of the rest of the group. But his creations — big, crazy improvisations like a Frankenstein monster with Elvis hair and guitar, and life-size superheroes with rippling balloon six-packs — speak



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awe" factor in making every odd request take wondrous shape in twisted latex. "Little girl was having her 10th birthday, and wanted a platypus," he says, by way of example. "So I made her one. And her grandpa told me, 'Every year since she was 1, the balloon guy would come to her table and she'd always ask for a platypus. On her 10th year, she finally got one.' Those are the kinds of things you do this for."

When he started his monthly jams, Vincent envisioned his role as a kind of "pop" culture homeroom teacher, leading the crew through whatever cool technique he may have picked up over the last few weeks.

"I say, 'Okay, everyone, gather 'round. We're gonna learn this new octopus.' Or, 'Okay, guys, what are we doing for porcupines?'"

Lately, though, Vincent's been losing some control over the group, as the talent showing up for the jams is beginning to eclipse his own.

Jeremy Johnston, a young hotshot known for making huge, elaborate balloon sculptures always off the top of his head, has become the main attraction at most jams, tonight whipping up a giant sleigh and reindeer while Vincent toils away quietly at an eight-foot Santa.

"Jeremy likes the big stuff," says Vincent, who obviously does, too. "And he's kind of the draw now. People come in and watch him."

Johnston, the son of veteran clown

loudly enough to set him apart from the crowd.

Vincent claims he has no problems sharing the spotlight with wunderkinds like Johnston.

"I don't wanna be overlooked," he says. "But I wanna showcase everybody. That's why we have the jams in public, instead of at someone's house. It's all about networking and sharing, and also getting exposure."

And, of course, having fun. "Oh, yeah. Sometimes we'll go 'til 2 in the morning," he says, getting back to his balloons. "It can be hard to stop, when a bunch of us get together."

as a balloon artist who travels in the same professional circles as other party entertainers, some of Ed Chee's best friends are clowns. But that doesn't mean the Valley's leading Certified Balloon Artist (CBA) likes the popular image the average Bozo has given to balloon art.

"When people think of balloons, the first image they have is of a clown at a kid's birthday party making swords," says Chee, whipping up his own twist on the clichéd party favor over afternoon coffee at the Starbucks across from Desert Ridge Marketplace, not far from where he lives. "But it's just way more advanced than that now."

Fashioning a deluxe ribbed handle at the sword base by twisting off a series

way with the ladies.

"We're glad to have Marie with us," Weigt says, picking up on her intro. "She's a hell of a twister — and kinda easy on the eyes, what do you think? I mean, is she hot or what!"

"When you first meet him," Dadow warns beforehand, "you're like, 'Whoa, buddy! Calm down a bit!' But then after that, you just have to love him."

Among the Valley's twisters, Weigt is the guy with all the wildest stories — although sometimes the others in the group can't resist retelling his greatest exploits themselves.

"The story I heard was he was out golfing," says Ric Fout, a fellow twister,

Weigt, a father of four who had joined the Peoria force just 18 months ago and was now, reports said, left paralyzed from the arms down, as J.P.'s son.

The imagery of the sad clown lurks beneath the surface of the balloon twisters' happy-go-lucky world. But at no time does it come more to life than in listening to J.P.'s account of how he sat at his son's bedside the day after the shooting and twisted balloons for what marked Bill's 31st birthday.

"It was his birthday on the 10th," Weigt says two days later, speaking in a slightly shaky voice on a cell phone from the hospital. "So I made him up a big birthday cake out of balloons, and a

Photos are everything in the twisters' world, where all great works of art shrivel within days. And exposure in any printed medium is seen as a major career-booster, if not a path to immortality for the doomed balloons. So it's probably only natural that the competition heats up whenever a few cameras are standing at the ready.

But there's an odd sense of abandonment after the photos have all been shot and the artists are left with the question of what to do with their masterpieces. Most opt to leave them behind, rather than squeeze them into their cars. A few of the smaller pieces are stuffed into a trash can, with a box cutter setting off deadly pops like a submachine gun.

Chee sees the brief shelf life of his art form as one of the main reasons people have trouble placing a high value on the twister's work.

"It's transitory art," he says sadly. "Let's face it: There are only so many days that the pieces will last."

For the twisters themselves, though, their art sometimes appears to be immediately disposable. After spending more than four hours teamed with Chee creating his elaborate giant motorcycle — complete with a cool teardrop gas tank, a V-block engine and flaming exhaust pipes — Vincent looks ready to simply walk out on the creation he's just given up a morning's work at his day job to complete.

"What do you want to do with this?" he's asked as he straps on his big balloon apron and turns to leave the studio.

Vincent just shrugs and delivers his cold verdict with the slightest smile.

"Pop it," he says.

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"ran into these ladies, got to talking, and they found out J.P. did balloons."

"Lady golfers," Dadow interjects, with a knowing smirk.

"Well, they hire him for a party, he gets there, and it's a lesbian party," Fout continues. "At the end of three hours of creating the lowdest, crudest balloons you can imagine, they pass around a brandy snifter, containing mostly \$50s and \$100s, and I heard by the end of the night he walked away with a little over \$1,100."

"I heard \$1,500," Dadow adds.

Weigt himself is a bit foggy on the amount, but vividly recalls the balloons he made and the wild time the ladies had with them.

"Let's just say it was a great day, dude! So much *funnnn!*" he says, with a wicked laugh. "Believe me, balloons aren't just for kids!"

Clearly, Weigt is the life of the party at the jams, and a big part of why they're still going. Dadow says he's the guy responsible for e-mailing the monthly invites and a major reason people keep returning for the fun.

"No matter what kind of mood you're in," Dadow says, "he just lifts your spirits so much."

Everyone's spirits were dealt a crushing blow just six days before Christmas, when the news broke of a Peoria police officer who'd been shot, just above his bulletproof vest, during a drug raid. Twisters recognized Bill

big ol' Santa Claus and a bunch of crap that he likes. And it was kind of cool to watch him light up. It lights up everybody else who comes in the room, too, and kinda takes everybody's mind off the bad stuff, at least for a while."

Weigt says he's already sending out the invites for the coming week's IHOP jam, and insists the show will go on.

"It's a little bit of a stress relief, and it kinda feels good when you get *pissed off* to twist something around," he adds, letting loose with one of his trademark laughs.

"We're hanging right in there, and we're gonna keep positive," he says. "That's where the balloons really help."

at a late December photo shoot featuring what a consensus of the community agrees to be the best of the Valley's twisters, there's a palpable tension in the air that isn't detectable at the monthly jams.

While Jeremy Johnston and Marie Dadow put the finishing touches on the elegant balloon dress they spent nine hours creating for JoAnn Gray the day before, and Ed Chee and Dan Vincent decide which parts of Vincent's giant motorcycle design they each want to tackle, Vincent's girlfriend Jessica — who, insiders say, is irked Gray has snatched the cover shot from her balloon-esque beau — keeps a disapproving eye fixed on Miss Ballooniverse.

Balloon Twisters