

WHAT MAKES BROOKE

At the events she goes to, Brooke can make a variety of balloon creatures

FLOWER BASKETS

HATS • SWORDS

MONKEYS IN TREES

BUTTERFLIES

AIR GUITARS • DOGS

...AND MORE

WHAT USES BROOKE

The materials used in Brookes' everyday work

BALLOONS

BALLOON SCRAPS

SCISSORS

SHARPIES

TIP JAR AT EVENTS

AIR PUMP

WHERE BEEN BROOKE'S

The places Brooke has been hired for her balloons

SUMMER EVENTS IN
THE VILLAGE

FALL FESTIVALS

HOMECOMING PARTY

BIRTHDAY PARTIES

UP, UP AND AWAY!

Sophomore Brooke Gariss's unique balloon art business, "Ballooney Tunes," has taught her to be patient and confident

by katie murphy

SOPHOMORE BROOKE GARISS'S hands smelled like latex, her palms were stained with blue, green, yellow and pink dye and her right index finger was throbbing purple from tying balloon after balloon.

Parents, who had been sweating in line for 40 minutes, stared her down as she twisted up her hundredth balloon dog of the day.

Gariss was manning her one-woman balloon stand as part of the entertainment for Prairie Village's summer live music festival — set up between The Body Lab and Bijin Spa where she'd been working for two hours and had already made \$140.

"It doesn't seem to matter where I set up because the kids always find me," Gariss said. "I show up in a balloon hat and they immediately congregate around me. It's kind of magical."

Gariss earns money and makes toddlers smile while learning to handle unusual situations filled with popped balloons, crying four-year-olds and pushy parents — all through her self-run balloon art business, "Ballooney Tunes."

Gariss first picked up a balloon pump for a fifth grade school project to "create a business." Inspired by balloon artists at birthday parties, Gariss ordered 100 balloons off Amazon for \$10. At the time, she wasn't very serious about ballooning — her family was convinced it was just a phase.

Four months later, she had an ear surgery that she had been waiting to receive since she was little. Sentenced to a month indoors with no exercising or sweating, Gariss began teaching herself how to make different balloon art projects off YouTube because she "had to stay entertained somehow."

Even after she had recovered, Gariss continued to twist up balloons alone in her room late at night, learning to make a flower one week and a pigeon the next. Her mom encouraged her to start working private parties in 2018. She booked her first gig that summer for one of her mom's friends at The Learning Tree, a toy shop in Corinth Square. To prepare, Gariss crafted a homemade balloon carrier — Dixie cups of balloons sorted by color and tied shut with zip

ties packed into a cardboard box.

"I make sure to keep the bags closed because balloons can go stale," Gariss said. "It's not something most people have to think about."

By then, she had a full repertoire stuffed with unicorns, monkeys on trees, guitars and butterflies. Her favorite thing to make was flower baskets — carefully woven with a handle and four white daisies. But once she was set up at the actual event with her first non-relative customers, she panicked. She swears she couldn't remember how to make anything other than balloon dogs in the moment.

"I just couldn't stop making them," Gariss said. "Dog after dog after dog."

Her hands were sweating the whole time — sometimes she would burst three balloons before successfully creating a dog. Heads turned with each pop as the line of people watched Gariss's every mistake. And then came her least favorite part — closing up her stand.

IT DOESN'T SEEM to matter

where I set up because the kids always find me. I show up in a balloon hat and they immediately congregate around me. It's kind of magical.

BROOKE GARISS •
SOPHOMORE

"Cutting off a line and telling a sobbing 7-year-old that you won't make them another balloon dog is very difficult," Gariss said.

She was only scheduled to work at The Learning Tree for one hour, but ended up staying for two because she was scared to turn families away.

Her muscle memory and confidence grew at her next few party bookings. She began to loosen up, making more than just dogs, and was able to enjoy her customers' company more — realizing that "kids are weird in a good way."

"About a month ago, this kid asked for a monkey on a sword, which was already a strange request," Gariss said. "Then, he ran off and sold



it to another kid right in front of me for \$2. He came back, showed me and was like, 'Look, I made two bucks' in a country accent. It made me laugh out loud."

Wide-eyed kids staring in wonder as she works and telling her she's "so cool" make the popped balloons, dye-stained hands and summertime sweat worth it for Garriss. While some parents politely leave her tips or bring her Kona Ice at parties, the rude parents always manage to find her stand.

"A sword will unravel after their kid swings it around for 30 minutes or pop after they whack it on spiky grass, and the parents will cut in front of the whole line and say, 'Fix this,'" Gariss said. "They think they can control me because I'm just a kid, but I've learned to say, 'No, there's a line.'"

Now, after four summers of practice, Gariss isn't afraid to cut off lines or stand up for herself against the "terrible parents." She doesn't get as frustrated when she accidentally pops balloons.

"I've learned to be patient with myself and stay calm, even if there's a long line of people waiting on me," Gariss said. "It's made me more mature."

She works at least six parties per summer, making around \$40 an hour — half of what professional balloon artists charge but still more than she makes babysitting, mowing lawns or coaching elementary school soccer. All of her summer events, fall church festivals and private homecoming parties are booked through word of mouth, and she's used to receiving positive feedback.

Gariss doesn't know any other teenagers who practice balloon art. To her knowledge, she's the only teen with over 1,000 balloons shoved in the back of their closet because it's a cool enough temperature to keep them fresh and who takes trips to the American Balloon Factory — a specialty balloon store — to purchase packs of balloons by the hundred. But it doesn't bother her to have an uncommon hobby.

"I like being unique," Gariss said. "Plus, there's less competition."