

One nation (BOOOOM! pop! pop!) under fireworks

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No other holiday unites people the way the Fourth of July does.

Vegetarians don't eat turkey at Thanksgiving. The only religion that celebrates Christmas is, oddly enough, Christianity (and as much as Pat Robertson hates to admit it, not everyone in America is Christian). Many people, myself often included, are asleep by the time midnight rolls around on New Year's Eve.

Yet everyone delights at fireworks and the famous cannons of the 1812 Overture.

That is, everyone but fireworks-stand workers. I should know, because for the last six years I have spent my Fourths of July not sprawled on a blanket ooohing and ahhhhing at the sky but working a 16-hour day in a 100-degree-plus fireworks tent, unloading thousands of boxes off trucks and answering customers' questions.

Customer: Hey, man, I'm looking for this firework.

Me: OK, do you know its name?

Customer: Naw.

Me: Well, do you know what color or shape it is?

Customer: I don't know, it looked like a firework.

Me: So what do you remember about it?

Customer: It went *whizzle, whizzle, vroooom, pop, pop, crackle!*

Me: Uh I'll see what I can do.

Customer: Also I liked the one that went BOOOOMM! Do you have any of the ones that go BOOOOMM?

Playing with fire

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It's actually not that bad. Sure, the work isn't glamorous (think carnival worker with worse hours), but the pay is good and you learn a lot. Not only about fireworks but about the people who buy fireworks.

Because everyone celebrates the Fourth, you see a lot more diversity working at a fireworks stand than you would, say, working at a country club. It's as if the melting pot of America turned on its side and everyone spilled out into the same mud field/hastily converted fireworks tent.

That's not to say everyone should buy fireworks. It's not uncommon to see toddlers holding big bags of explosives. You know - little kids barely old enough to walk. Fathers behind them, barely sober enough to walk. You'd hope there would be someone else to monitor the kid playing with fire besides an adult who's been seeing fireworks in his head since that morning.

For the most part, though, everybody is polite, patient and confused. We may have different backgrounds, but we're united in trying to figure out the difference between a flaming Roman candle and a firing Roman candle (answer: not much).

United by explosives

It's not customers' fault. Fireworks makers like to give as little information as possible to the customer about what it is a certain firework is supposed to do.

As a rule of thumb, though, the more outlandish the name, the less spectacular the firework. Stay away from ones with names like "Meganator 2000!" or "Fully Armed Functioning Nuclear Warhead."

In fact, my best advice is not to overthink fireworks. After all, nobody is judging your patriotism by how big or loud your display is. Instead, just buy enough to have fun - and don't forget to enjoy the experience of the fireworks tent.

You might be surprised by the cast of characters: Jaded teens, exhausted single mothers, new immigrants, country bumpkins and older people are all transformed once inside the fireworks tent. They are one with the snakes and bottle rockets.

So this Fourth, as you're buying fireworks made in China next to a man born in Mexico or listening to an overture written by a Russian commemorating a war with the French, just remember it's our diversity that makes us unique. But it's our freedom that makes America great.

Be sure to exercise that freedom by (safely) setting off as many colored explosives as you like.

Owen Morris of Leawood is a staff writer for The Pitch. To comment, send e-mail to starmag@kcstar.com

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