

## 07-04-08 Fourth of July: Celebrate Safely

I love fireworks! That love affair with pyrotechnic displays began with my father. He wasn't a big fan of fairs and carnivals, though. He taught me to be sensitive towards all kinds of people but wary of hoaxes and deceptive practices. So, although we might not have visited the racetracks or wasted our money at the midway, come nighttime, we would walk down the street to the old fairgrounds in South Weymouth and would stand just outside of the chain link fence, waiting for the fireworks display to begin. His face would light up not only with the reflection of the bright lights but also from within with delight and satisfaction. Then, of course, there was the pause, followed by the best part of all: the boom! We would say, "Oh, that was a good one!"

His love of the display was not diminished by his knowledge of a tragic death from fireworks. He clearly loved the sight and the sounds of fireworks and wanted me to enjoy them also, but he also wanted me to realize the hazards of them. We would maintain a safe distance between the location of the "shooter" and where we stood. We would keep our eyes open for sparks and debris. We would stay safe and then we would have fun. As they say in CERT, "Safety First".

One year, when I was about nine years old, I was asking lot of "what if and why" questions and he confided in me that his brother, Harland, had died from a firecracker going down his shirt and exploding. Yet, my father still loved them. He did not blame the fireworks for the accident. He learned the lesson that many so-called accidents could be prevented. As I grew older I gained an appreciation for the wisdom of learning rather than blaming.

I can apply my father's lessons on a daily basis in my municipal job as a health agent. Perhaps more than any other day in the year, though, the celebration of Fourth of July stirs his lessons from my heart and allows them to surface in my mind. As a health agent, I have the opportunity to see safety measures behind the scenes and am proud to report that numerous departments work together to deliver the best show without compromising safety. The potential for danger is there and it is respected, with appropriate measures.

The person responsible for the storage, the setting up and the setting off of the fireworks is called "the shooter". He, or she, is, after all, lighting and sending up into the air, devices filled with gunpowder, much like huge bullets and bombs. The shooter will have constant and dedicated communication with the Fire Chief. Those two will not share their channel of communication anyone else. Fire suppression equipment will be dedicated to the site of the shooter. The Fire Chief also has to be prepared to assist in health and safety crises that might arise anywhere in town, related or unrelated to the day's festivities. There is no moratorium on heart attacks and accidents just because the some of us are celebrating.

In addition to the Fire Department's readiness, numerous other departments are on duty just in case. Highway, Water, Police, Building Maintenance, Board of Health, Halifax in Lights Committee and CERT are present and watching. Is the food being prepared safely? Is the traffic being managed? Are there any problems in the crowd? Do we have electricity and water available? Are radios working and have the channels been figured out and rehearsed?

Some towns have a Medical Reserve Corps; Halifax has CERT, Community Emergency Response Team. CERT plays the role of assessing and assisting before first responders have arrived. In between disasters, they assist other departments as trained and trusted citizens in any way they can. For the Fourth of July, they will help to make sure the handicap parking spaces are used only by the handicapped. They will have direct communication with the dispatchers and can report suspicious activities and/or problems. Some will be posted at key locations to watch for

sparks and debris from the fireworks. They act as additional eyes for the Fire and Police Departments.

Considering that 8,500 people in the US are treated each year for fireworks-related injuries, it's a good thing that Halifax takes the time to be prepared. The annual estimated cost of fireworks-related injuries in the US is \$100 million.

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control tells us:

- Those most frequently injured by fireworks are boys aged 10 to 14 years old.
- More than 40% of those injured are children younger than 14.
- The most frequently and most seriously injured are active participants in fireworks related activities, not bystanders and audiences.
- Fireworks can be life threatening. In 1997, seven people were killed from fireworks-related injuries.
- Fireworks can also cause life-threatening residential fires.

Here's to you, Uncle Harland. I never met you but you teach me each and every year. Thank you.

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