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NEWS

FLAG SELLER RECOUNTS BURNING

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A quirk of fate has put Jim Fudge - "Just like in candy" - smack dab in the middle of the flag-burning furor.

Fudge is a spokesman for Betsy Ross Flag Girl Inc., which sells American flags throughout the nation. A call to the company's St. Louis office Friday was forwarded to Fudge at Betsy Ross headquarters in Dallas.

"We sell flags and anything that goes along with flags," said Fudge.

But Fudge has not always been a flag merchant.

In 1984, he was an auditor for the Mercantile National Bank of Dallas when a young man ran off with an American flag that was one of several the bank had posted to welcome the Republican National Convention.

The flag wound up in the hands of Gregory L. Johnson, who doused it with kerosene and set it afire to protest the policies of President Ronald Reagan. Johnson was convicted for burning the flag, and it was that conviction that was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court recently.

"I remember the day perfectly well," Fudge said. "One of the guards reported a gentleman had grabbed the flag and was running down the street."

Fudge said he took early retirement from the bank. "It's a strange coincidence that I ended up in the flag business," he said.

The uproar over the Supreme Court's decision has resulted not only in proposals for a constitutional amendment prohibiting flag burning, but also calls for a fireproof flag.

Fudge said President George Bush and other politicians are rallying around the flag because "it's a politically good thing. It's like motherhood and apple pie."

"It's something you can make a positive statement about and the few you would offend would be a minority," he said. "Like the guy who burned the flag, I'm sure you'd offend him."

While Fudge said a constitutional amendment would appease those worried about flag burning, he said he wasn't so hot about the fireproof flag idea.

"That would be strictly nothing but a sales gimmick," he said. "I don't see the point. I can't see people just going out and burning flags all over the place."

The flag selling business, historically, hits a peak on the Fourth of July when patriotic fevers run high.

This year, Fudge said, sales are even higher because of anger over the recent Supreme Court's decision.

"People are buying flags to show their consternation, or whatever," Fudge said.

Thousands of homeowners in the St. Louis metropolitan area got their flags free this weekend, courtesy of Coldwell Banker. The real estate company for years has been marking the Fourth of July with small American flags stuck in the front lawns of homes.

"We started this out in the St. Charles County area; last year, they put out about 10,000 flags," said Leonard Million, manager of the Crestwood office, which distributed 1,700 flags.

"We didn't do it this year because of the flag-burning episodes," Million said. "But obviously, with that very much in everyone's mind, it's certainly relevant. It certainly hits home."

Paul Jokerst III lives in St. Charles, but he put out his own flag. Like several others in the area, Jokerst is flying his flag at half-staff to protest the Supreme Court's decision.

"I don't see how they can take our symbol for freedom and say that under certain conditions you could burn it," said Jokerst, 22. "There's other things that people can do with freedom of speech, you don't have to burn the flag."

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Jokerst said his whole family - from his grandfather, Paul Jokerst Sr., 64, and father, Paul Jr., to his brother, Cory, 14 - feels strongly about the flag.

"He was a radio operator in a bomber in World War II," Jokerst said of his grandfather. "I raise the flag in the morning and my little brother takes it down at night.

"The way I look at it, and the way my grandfather does, is I don't ever want to catch anybody burning the flag."

SKETCH by Knight-Ridder Tribune News / PAULSOUTAR - Displaying the flag - Sketches of the parts of the flag and the various positions it can be displayed in. Explanation and description of the various positions.

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