

TAMPA BAY AND STATE

Free and easy // Suncoast pledges itself to having fun

KARL VICK; STEVAN ALLEN; STEVEN DRUMMOND; TAMMERLIN DRUMMOND; LAURA GRIFFIN; SALLY HICKS; JENNIFER L. STEVENSON

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Peter Nesterock does it every year - plant four little American flags on the border of his blanket at Clearwater's Coachman Park, where he'll have a view of the fireworks. It's just that this year flags seem as much statement as gesture.

``I hated the Supreme Court ruling,`` he said. That ruling said the burning of the American flag as a form of political protest cannot be prohibited.

Coldwell Banker does the same thing Nesterock does, only on a larger scale. The realty company dispatched workers to plant more than 25,000 flags in Tampa Bay front yards the night before the Fourth.

``That's wonderful,`` said Thelma Aronson, who discovered hers at 760 30th Ave. N in St. Petersburg when she stepped out to pick up her morning paper.

``I appreciate it,`` said Frank Box of 2801 67th St. N, St. Petersburg. ``I appreciate the flag, too. I think a lot more of that than I do of those people burning it.``

That was Independence Day, 1989: parades, fireworks, and flag-waving much more in the spirit of the holiday than of protest.

``It's more of a party,`` said 9-year-old Shevelle Davidson, asked the significance of the day at a parade in Brandon.

A general lack of gravity prevailed all around Tampa Bay.

In Hillsborough County, where Wee Miss Brandon was crowned, the person playing the Statue of Liberty grew tired of hefting the torch and inserted a fake arm in her robes.

``That lady actually has three arms,`` the announcer observed.

In Citrus County, Amy Gysan won the apple pie competition at Whispering Pines Park with a recipe ``straight out of the Betty Crocker Cookbook.``

``I want to thank my family for eating all the practice pies,`` she said.

In Hernando, the Brookridge parade remained the county's largest July Fourth celebration and one of Florida's most appropriate: Decorated golf carts snaking through a subdivision.

Booming Pasco featured one distinctly old-fashioned celebration (puppet shows, sack races) in Sims Park and another in air-conditioned Gulf View Square Mall.

There was a sand castle contest and body painting in Treasure Island in Pinellas County.

``It's good healthy fun for the children,`` said Elizabeth Burnside, as she made one grandchild into Tony the Tiger and the other a skeleton.

Chris Nikolisch won ``Most Patriotic`` sand sculpture. She said it was a blimp but most people thought it looked more like a whale.

``This was fun but the best part is at night when we dress up as pirates for the invasion of the city,`` the 25-year-old St. Petersburg woman said. ``We have to go find the buried treasure and then we pass it out to all the children.``

By midafternoon, people were laying out picnic blankets and scoping sight lines for the fireworks displays. St. Petersburg's Straub Park offered carnival rides and a street fair, but the Barvelons of Largo had found a cool spot under a tree.

``We've been coming here for years because they always have the best fireworks,`` said Brenda Borvelon. ``There's a lot to do.``

There were no shady spots left when Helen and Gerry Conley began unloading chicken, chips and chairs at Coachman Park. But they didn't seem to mind.

``We're going to pig out,`` Mrs. Conley said. - Staff writers Stevan Allen, Steven Drummond, Tammerlin Drummond, Laura Griffin, Sally Hicks and Jennifer L. Stevenson contributed to this report.