

METRO AND STATE

Flags and fireworks // Independence Day filled with parades, contests, protests

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Evelyn Kelly of Hernando County was born on the Fourth of July, and Monday she celebrated her 69th birthday and her country's 212th.

``I love the Fourth of July,`` the New York City native said. ``My brothers always woke me up with firecrackers. I always went to a parade or was in one.``

Evelyn Kelly and the other residents of the community of High Point in Hernando County celebrated the Fourth in traditional style. Their observance featured a parade with 60 participants led by 92-year-old Anna Scofield, a flag-raising ceremony, swimming races, games and entertainment.

Other residents along the Suncoast marked the day with watermelon seed-spitting contests, water sports, fireworks and a protest rally. A number of neighborhoods got an early Independence Day surprise.

``I woke up this morning, went to get the paper, and there was a cute little flag,`` said Terry Lea Hankins, who lives in St. Petersburg.

``There was one for everybody on the end of the sidewalk. I thought, ``Who's the flag fairy?````

More than a dozen neighborhoods in St. Petersburg were decorated with the 2-foot-tall American flags.

Coldwell-Banker realty company was the gift-giver. ``It was meant as a Fourth of July gesture,`` said John McLaughlin, manager of the company's Fourth Street office in St. Petersburg.

Between 4:30 and 6 a.m. Monday, real estate agents placed 25,000 flags in neighborhoods in St. Petersburg, Tampa, New Port Richey, Clearwater and other cities, he said.

In the Shady Hills area of northwest Pasco County, residents combined their traditional Independence Day celebration with a rally opposing the county's proposed trash-to-energy incinerator. Along with the sack races, watermelon-eating contest and fireworks display, residents released about 500 multicolored balloons.

Each balloon was emblazoned with a ``Dump Buster`` logo that included an incinerator with dollar signs floating out of the smokestack and a skull and crossbones. Each balloon also carried a card warning its finder that the incinerator would pollute the region's air and water - a warning that county officials say is groundless.

In St. Petersburg, contestants in the inner-tube regatta raced their makeshift crafts across the Vinoy Basin. Hundreds of people crowded the city's waterfront for the Skyblast celebration, which included food, a craft show, jazz festival and a nighttime fireworks show.

Fireworks were suspected of starting numerous minor fires in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties.

``We've just got brush fires all over the place,`` a Hillsborough County fire dispatcher said Monday night.

At least a dozen small fires were reported in St. Petersburg. In Pasco County, firefighters said five brush fires, including one covering three acres, were believed to have been started by fireworks.

At the seventh annual Old Fashioned Gala in Keystone Park in Northwest Hillsborough, contests for spitting watermelon seeds and blowing bubble gum kept some kids busy.

The champ among about a dozen spitters sent seeds flying about 10 feet, even beyond the white mat put on the ground for measuring, while the best gum blowers achieved bubbles bigger than baseballs before the sticky pink stuff burst all over their faces.

The day also attracted many boaters to the annual Davis Islands Yacht Club Independence Regatta and Boat Parade at the mouth of the Hillsborough River near downtown Tampa. After traveling between Davis Islands and nearby Harbour Island, some of the boaters anchored to enjoy music by the Grass Roots and a nighttime fireworks display.

Many Citrus County residents spent Independence Day on the water.

Parking lots for popular boat ramps such as the Lake Henderson and North Apopka ramps in Inverness and Pete's Pier and the Plantation Inn in Crystal River were crammed with empty trailers by midmorning.

Much of the boating activity could be attributed to the scallop harvesting season, which opened along the coast July 1, marine officials said.

Keith Miritello, duty officer for the Homosassa Springs Marine Patrol office, said the scalloping this season ranged from mediocre to good. On his radio, he had overheard several people boasting about big scallop finds - something most boaters would try to keep secret.

``They were just trying to tell their friends where they were,`` Miritello said. ``What they didn't realize was there were 2,000 people tuned in on that frequency.`` - Staff writers Barbara Behrendt, Leslie Brody, Daryle Glynn Brown, Teresa Burney, Alicia Caldwell, Richard Danielson and Frank DeLoache contributed to this report.

COLOR PHOTO, Maurice Rivenbark; COLOR PHOTO, Jim Stem; Fourth of July: 88, (2); Caption: Natacie Estrada and her daughter Natassia enjoy the festivities in Straub Park (ran editions 1,2,3); Fireworks above Tampa (ran edition 4).

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