

NEWS

Real flag-wavers Immigrants spread Stars and Stripes around to alert others to freedoms

Jill Jordan Spitz
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As the rest of the city gears up this morning for Independence Day, the Peera family is winding down.

They're probably sleeping, trying to recover from their annual Independence Day tradition - rising long before dawn to post American flags on every mailbox in their East Side neighborhood.

"It's our family's way to uphold the principles of democracy in this country - plus to send a message to other Americans that they should take time to appreciate what they have," said Shiraz Ali Peera, who has presided over the Fourth of July flag project with his wife, their three children and friends for the past decade.

The annual display started as a sales promotion for Peera's employer, Coldwell Banker. The company supplied flags for agents to give to customers; Peera, a Realtor, requested enough for every house in his neighborhood, southwest of East Golf Links and South Harrison roads.

He was so taken with the idea that he kept at it year after year, moving beyond his immediate neighborhood into surrounding ones and placing a standing order for 1,200 plastic flags and wooden poles with a California distributor. Although the Coldwell Banker project has long since ended, the company still helps out with the \$400 flag bill, Peera said.

From the most cynical perspective, the effort is still at least partly about money - a card attached to each flagpole reminds recipients of flag-worthy holidays on one side and touts Peera's realty know-how on the other. But a few moments with Peera are all it takes to see that he has a higher mission than making a quick buck.

With a penchant for red, white and blue polo shirts and a "Proud to be an American" sticker by the front door, Peera is unabashedly patriotic. With good reason, he says - he and his wife know what it's like to live without the freedoms Americans take for granted.

Shiraz Peera, an East Indian who was raised in Africa, watched the newly socialized Tanzanian government seize his family's property.

Lydia Peera, who comes from the Philippines, was sent to live in America as a young woman after one too many of her friends was sent to prison for protesting against the government.

"People here do not appreciate the freedom, the opportunities we have," he said. "They don't understand how lucky they are to be born and raised in this country."

The Peeras raised their children to appreciate their diverse ethnic heritage but to love their country. So the kids always look forward to the flag distribution - even though it means hitting the street by 4 a.m., said Alia Peera, 18, a recent graduate of Santa Rita High School.

Doing so honors her country and her deeply patriotic parents, said Alia, who leaves next month for the University of Southern California.

"This is kind of my way to pay tribute," she said.

With her older brother and sister off at college this summer, Alia recruited 10 of her friends - including 18-year-old Isaiah Yslas, who leaves tomorrow for Army boot camp.

"It's something to do before I take off for the service," Yslas said. "It's like a steppingstone, in terms of patriotism."

Peera doesn't expect his flags to change the world - to turn apathy into patriotism or anger into pride. But he said he hopes that when his neighbors walk out their front doors this morning and see the Stars and Stripes fluttering in the wind, they'll take just a moment to ponder what it means to be an American - not just on a national holiday, but every day.

"This is just a reminder," he said. "This appreciation should be continued throughout the year."

As a couple who chose to be Americans, Peera said he believes he and his wife may be the perfect people to spread that message.

"You have to have seen the darkness," he said, "to be able to see the light."

Photoby Joshua Trujillo/Staff: Shiraz Ali Peera, top, and his family, clockwise, Lydia Peera, Ryan Wirasinha and Alia Peera, get up before dawn every year to set out about 1,200 flags.