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Family keeps the fire(works) going



Victor Foster, front right, shops for fireworks at Poor Paul's on Saturday in Spartanburg. Foster said he was looking for some "really big stuff" to celebrate the Fourth of July.

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The Brock family doesn't celebrate the Fourth of July -- at least not in the traditional sense.

And it's not because they're not patriotic. They just don't have time.

For more than four decades, the summer holiday has meant one thing to them.

"Work," said Doris Brock, owner of Poor Paul's Fireworks on Asheville Highway.

Each year, the Brocks spend their Independence Day selling fireworks to last-minute buyers.

"I guess I was born into it," said David Brock, the first of Doris' five children. "Some mammas force-feed their children church. I was force-fed fireworks."

But for Brock, as well as his siblings, being "force-fed" the fireworks business was something he didn't mind.

"[It's good] if it's something you enjoy doing and it's your job," he said. "I like to sell fireworks."

And people like buying fireworks from Poor Paul's. In fact, most buyers are repeat customers.

"I'd say 85 percent of our customers have been here before," said Darryl Brock, Doris' fourth child.

"We see people's grandkids. The other day I saw a man who was 25. He said his dad brought him here when he was 6 or 7 years old."

The store -- which stays open year-round -- began as a simple fireworks stand in 1955, operated by Doris' late husband, Paul.

And for the Brocks, July Fourth is not just a big day for business, it's a day for a big family to come together and continue a tradition.

"Everybody helps out when the Fourth comes," David Brock said. "If we don't have the family, we won't be able to run the business."

This holiday, all five siblings will pitch in, with some coming from as far away as Florida to do their part.

They will also get help from their 11 grandchildren, who range in age from 2 to 23.

"Family means a lot [to me]. It means everything, really," Doris Brock said. "Paul loved his family."

Since Paul's death in 2002, the family has continued to operate the business, although they said it hasn't been easy.

"It's different. It's sad. This was his time," said Denise Lowery, the second child. "Some people don't even know and ask about him."

"This time of the year is the hardest for our family. I saw the fireworks at Barnet Park the other night and thought of my dad. It's bittersweet."

To those who knew him, Paul was more than a businessman and father. He was someone who took in alcoholics and prisoners, gave firecrackers to children and helped put on fireworks shows for the mentally handicapped.

"Everybody comes in here and says, 'Paul was so good to us,'" Doris Brock said. "He loved people and loved kids."

One of the people Paul helped was Russell "Red" Ewerth.

A red-bearded rambler from Oklahoma, Ewerth left his family when he was 15.

Ewerth said Paul paroled him out of prison and helped him get back on his feet.

"I worked for practically free for him for years," he said. "I did it more for the companionship than anything else."

Ewerth said Paul's attitude about the friendship was essentially the same as it was about business.

"He talked to everybody that came through," he said. "He used to say, 'Your friendship is worth more than your business.' "

With Paul's values in mind, the Brocks will once again offer up their fireworks and fellowship to the Spartanburg community, a community that stops by once a year to buy the sparkling essentials of the holiday.

"Three generations come to this place," Ewerth said. "A lot of people would be lost if this fireworks store didn't open. They wouldn't know what to do."