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Having a Blast

By Vince Guerrieri

After 40 years, Bruce Zoldan's best-selling Phantom Fireworks brand is still celebrating the region's successes.

Paul Combs

Most high school boys would go starry-eyed over a cache of pyrotechnics. But when Bruce Zoldan's father drove home with a trunk full of fireworks one Fourth of July, he saw profit. "Before we could use them, I started selling them to my friends in the neighborhood," Zoldan says. "I started to get excited about fireworks."

Zoldan has made them his life's work. While at Youngstown State University in the 1970s, he would borrow his mother's Chevy Impala, drive to Toledo — one of only two municipalities where he could buy them — drive them back to Youngstown and pay his tuition with the profits. In 1973, still a student, he formed the B.J. Alan Co.

By the U.S. bicentennial in 1976, Zoldan says, everybody wanted some. "Without realizing it, I was doing half a million dollars in sales."

Nearly 40 years later, business is still booming. Under the Phantom Fireworks brand, the company is the nation's largest retailer of consumer fireworks with 75 superstores, 1,400 seasonal stands and tents and more than \$100 million in revenue.

Nearly 250 — about half its total workforce — are employed year-round in Youngstown. Despite adding 2,000 storage trailers, the company outgrew its facility and purchased a former Delphi Packard plant in Warren.

At 1.2 million square feet, the new facility is the central distribution center for the company, which also has locations in Cocoa, Florida, and Salt Lake City. "It gives us the ability to grow with the market," Zoldan says.

With such consistent growth, it might appear that Zoldan's company has gone unchallenged. But fireworks are a heavily regulated business. In 1973, about 12 states allowed sales of fireworks. Through 40 years of political activism, Zoldan has helped raise that number to 47.

Ohio isn't among them.

"We have on many occasions tried to liberalize the laws so that citizens can not only buy them but use them," he says, referring to the odd dispensation which allows residents to purchase — but not use — fireworks in Ohio.

Still, it hasn't stopped Zoldan from calling the Mahoning Valley home.

"Youngstown is a place that provided the opportunity for me to build my business," he says. "After losing the steel business, we strived for every industry we could. I believe in never forgetting where you came from, and giving back to those who helped."

IB: What's your favorite firework?

BZ: The 500 gram repeater. The name refers to the charge, and ... 500 grams is the largest amount that can be sold and still characterized as consumer fireworks. It's got multiple shots bursting, and it's like a grand finale. And everyone loves a grand finale.

IB: What's the appeal of fireworks to you as a business?

BZ: We are an industry that helps Americans celebrate — primarily the Fourth of July, but also New Year's Eve and any other special event or occasion. The nice thing about pyrotechnics is that it's usually used once a year but can be used more for special occasions. Because it's done infrequently, Americans can spend more money on it.

IB: Would you ever consider doing anything else?

BZ: I've been involved in various sports as a hobby and a sideline business. In 1999 to 2000 ... there were about a half dozen of us that got together and bought horses. I've had three Kentucky Derby horses, and in 2011 one of my horses, Animal Kingdom, won the Kentucky Derby. We celebrated with fireworks and great friends. We had a great time.

IB: So you're a sports lover?

BZ: I also own the United States Hockey League team the Youngstown Phantoms. We are the anchor tenant of the Covelli Center in downtown Youngstown. I can take a break from the firework business and get some psychological therapy by going to a horse race or to a hockey game.

IB: How do you celebrate Independence Day?

BZ: I usually work, and I have for all these years, until 10 or 11 o'clock. I go home and have a cocktail and watch somebody shoot some fireworks. I sit back and relax and say, "Thank you God for delivering me through another year, and I hope to see another one." On the way home, I see fireworks in every direction, and I'm proud to say most of them probably came from a Phantom Fireworks store.

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