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# Getting to the Fourth

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By **Ronault Catalani**

Getting to the Fourth takes some effort. Getting to the real meaning of the Fourth of July, getting why we get the day off, is not so obvious. Not in our neighborhood, not around our raucous Sunday kitchen table of ambitious new Americans.

About all this, we need to talk – because one in seven Portlanders is foreign-born. One out of two if you live in our metro area's far west or east ends. About the same amount of newcomer energy as the era most settled Portlanders' great grandparents arrived in their new homeland. In America.

Now, unlike my parents' unschooled generation, mine is not completely clueless about July 4, 1776. We got it from high school U.S. history hardbacks. Our chapter began with a picture of Paul Revere on a rearing Quarter Horse and ended with one of General Washington in a rocking troop boat.

I got the idea, sure I did. But I never got the feeling. The Fourth of July feeling. And I'm sorry for that. Getting there requires something more. Something salient. Something Greek grandpas get in their bones every time I ask them to recall kicking the Turks out of Hellas. Something that always ends in tears.

The same currency runs through Portland's Palestinians or Beaverton's Viet Kieu when they give themselves over to telling you about their national holiday. It actually fills the room. That feeling.

Fourth of July sales inserts thickening my morning paper, the heavenly scent of hickory-grilled ribs filling our leafy neighborhood, just don't get me there. And no matter how hard I try, neither do River Willamette's spectacular fireworks.

New Americans may need more. And maybe more settled Americans do too, because not a lot of either group has much of a direct-connect to those rebellious patriots who actually chased away British colonial rule. The War for Independence was older than a hundred year-old memory when a million European immigrants arrived to farm and labor the expanding American experience.

And while Oregon's Asian pioneers have been busy here for much of the 1900s, most of our African, South and Southeast Asian, our Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American families made their homes here between Ronald Reagan and just now.

How Native Americans fit into this identity issue is theirs to determine, but for those of us newer to their blessed continent it may be accurate to say that the problem, our problem, is coherence. At issue is coming to consensus around a common American ethos. In this instance, getting us under one tent on what and how to celebrate.

This year, making meaning of the Fourth took a muscular guy named Alex, whose parents brought him from Mexico, and a savvy activist named Som, who brought his parents from Bhutan. It took a conscientious Somali organizer called Jamal and it took a tireless East Portland teacher her kids and their parents call "Mizz Anne." Cool and kind Dan and Mark from Fire Stations 7 and 35 were two of twenty coaches it took to get 224 newcomer guys playing like American winners.

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What's this?

It took, in short, a committed crew of new and settled Portlanders to get us a shared meaning out of our July 4 weekend. What we got was River City's second annual Refugee World Cup, a tournament of intense play after a season of training hard teenagers whose families fled 16 of earth's nastiest nations.

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There was no international media, we had not a single sneaker sponsor. But City Commissioner Nick Fish told those boys' parents how proud he was and Commissioner Fritz (baitingly in a blue UK jersey) kicked out the game's first ball.

Portlanders are like that. Portland has a global reputation for compassion. Mercy Corps and Medical Teams International work from here. And hundreds of optimistic families arrive here, every year. They arrive out from under America's finest bridges, they come out from under our world's worst regimes.

Pretty good for a medium-size city, in a contracted economy, up two silty river bends. Getting those vigorous kids' feet and minds moving away from their packed apartment complexes' dark inevitabilities, is at the heart of the matter. And I'm getting that maybe this is the heart of the Fourth. Three generations from five continents and six of our precious little planet's religious traditions tying shoes tight, pulling socks high, and screaming crazy for your favorite squad. All of us making new Americans and remaking America.

Next Fourth weekend, next year, getting to the meaning of America will be a straight shot for a few hundred Portlanders, new and settled ones alike. Right up I-5, right at Delta Park, rich confluence of our two river matriarchs, then straight to where all those families are screaming crazy.

*Ronault Catalani is an activist attorney and author of "Counter Culture, Immigrant Stories from Portland Café Counters."*

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**thesaurusrex**

July 03, 2011 at 8:15PM

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Great column! Thanks!

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**nwokie**

July 03, 2011 at 9:15PM

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Well since their now in the United States, maybe you should have them playing an American game, learning something about American culture! Baseball, or maybe a pick up touch football game!

Serve them some hot dogs hamburgers maybe some watermelon. Until recently immigrants assimilated into the US culture, now they want to stay seperate don't respect American culture and want US citizens to pay their way!

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**debtfree9**

July 04, 2011 at 9:20AM

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What a negative statement. Can you think of anything positive? I think it is great that they get together, play, cheer, and have fun. Who cares what game it is? Not me!

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**nwokie** July 04, 2011 at 12:57PM

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Its not negative, it is constructive criticism! You may have read the maid that accused the world bank head of rape, has now been found to be a working prostitute and lied to get into the US through the refugee program.

I was simply pointing out in the interest of assimilating in the US, traditional 4th of july activities would be more in order.

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**Munchausenbaron** July 04, 2011 at 8:14PM

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I keep wondering if certain members of the French govt. had Strauss-Kahn set-up, so he'd have no chance of running for the French Presidency; and he was the odds-on favorite to win, until his arrest. He was a known womanizer, so it wouldn't be hard to do. I think that the most likely scenario was that the maid came onto him or vice versa, she showed interest, and of course he fell for it. Then when the nasty deed was done, she cried "rape"! He panicked and fled the hotel for the airport where he was apprehended. Most likely someone paid her to do this as well.

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**leap29** July 04, 2011 at 10:37PM

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Nwokie - It was not "constructive criticism." On your part, was a reaction to a perceived loss of the American way - baseball and hot dogs - replaced by soccer and noodles. Yeah, that's sure something we need to fear. Nwokie, I'm sure millions of "real" Americans did not play baseball and did not eat burgers or hot dogs. Our family did neither.

Let yourself relax.

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**debtfree9** July 04, 2011 at 9:23AM

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Further more, it is time for you to be a good American and learn how to use there/their and spell "separate". What happened to your education?

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**leap29** July 04, 2011 at 10:38PM

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Good reply, Debtfree!

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**leap29** July 04, 2011 at 10:32PM

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Nwokie - You can't be serious (though I'm sure you are). You're making a fuss about what games they play? Nwokie, soccer is HOT in Portland. Have you failed to notice that Major League Soccer has killed minor league baseball in home attendance. I love baseball, am bored by soccer, but Portland is not a baseball city. Let 'em play soccer. What's the big deal?

As for the food, if I were in some country that had a steady diet of beetles, I would very politely decline my serving.

And where did the "pay their way" remark come from? Stay on topic, please.

I encourage you to be less paranoid. Now, go outside and be an American and set off some M-80's.

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**leap29** July 05, 2011 at 9:28PM

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As usual, Nwokie fails to respond.

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**LibertyQuotient**

July 04, 2011 at 6:59AM

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Democracy is self rule, but on this 235th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence most Americans are instead subjugated by the tyrannical rule of the corpocracy, the Devil's marriage between corporations and government, with corporations in the driver's seat. The harm being done is horrendous: a shrinking middle class; gaping income inequality; soaring unemployment; soaring poverty rate; big school dropout rate; millions of uninsured Americans; low life expectancy at birth; rising malnutrition and hunger; overflowing prisons; hoodlum gangs; and endless, winless foreign wars.

No wonder 70-80% of Americans think that: America is declining; corporations are too powerful; government is too big; and endless, winless, deadly wars are wrong. These Americans might be willing to sign a 2nd Declaration of Independence and have it sent to President Obama, Congress, and the U.S. Supreme Court (see [www.democracypowernow.com](http://www.democracypowernow.com)).

A 2nd Declaration of Independence should not lead to another bloody revolution. The corpocracy can be ended peacefully, politically, and legally. All that is required is the will of the American people and an organized and united way to start major political, judicial, and economic reforms. Maybe the 236th anniversary could then be closer to a real one.

Gary Brumback  
[www.democracypowernow.com](http://www.democracypowernow.com).

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**nwokie**

July 04, 2011 at 8:52AM

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Spoken like a true socialist/communist, a corporation is nothing but a collection of people pooling their resources, most corporations are small, however the large ones employ millions of people, provide goods and services at a fraction of the cost otherwise, and develop new products that make all of our lives easier!

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**leap29**

July 04, 2011 at 10:40PM

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It's "lives," Nwokie, not "lifes."

I imagine the real truth is somewhere between your version and LibertyQuotient's version.

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**flatcar**

July 04, 2011 at 11:00AM

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What in the world is this guy writing about when he writes:

"Now, unlike my parents' unschooled generation, mine is not completely clueless about July 4, 1776. We got it from high school U.S. history hardbacks."

Which generation is he claiming was unschooled about the Fourth of July historical facts? I am of the so called greatest generation, the one that came of age during the 1930s depression, went to war and saved the world from Nazism and Japanese Imperialism. In elementary school we cited the pledge of allegiance while standing and facing our national flag. No one would ever consider going out in the streets and burning a stars and stripes flag. In school we learned about Paul Revere, George Washington, Valley Forge, etc. and the Declaration of Independence.

Our generation would not have considered electing to the presidency an individual who had attended a church for twenty years where the pastor regularly cursed the USA. Now the deniers will claim my generation would not have elected a person who was black and they will be correct, however, my generation would never have elected a man who aided and abetted the enemy while we were at war like John Kerry did and he is white.

If the writer of this piece believes he was taught the true history of the USA he is an aberration. The schools of today are teaching slanted history and as James Dunnigan and Albert Nofi wrote in their book "Dirty Little Secrets of World War 11" on page 64 historical ignorance among young people is a result of the schools of today have deemphasized the study of history. The foregoing is paraphrasing of their actual writing but is clearly the intent of the authors.

It is remarkable to know that numerous young people are taking the teaching with a grain of salt as indicated by the number that are willing to join the military. It must be due to grandparents

who are providing them with the correct historical facts about their country.

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**John in Beaverton** July 04, 2011 at 11:30AM

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Flat:

About ten years ago one of my sons brought home his High School history text book. When I looked at it, the blatant bias jumped out at me. I spent several hours going through the first 10 chapters of the book which covered the period of the early exploration of America through the Civil War and putting sticky notes next to the biased passages. When he took his book to school the next day I mentioned the sticky notes and asked him to think about them when he read the text. The last thing I wanted was to set up an adversarial role between him and the teacher. My son never brought the text home again and the subject of the sticky notes never came up. At the end of the year, I asked my son if my sticky notes gave him items to think about. He gave me a blank stare and then replied, "Oh the teacher skipped the early years of America and went directly to the Vietnam War and spent the rest of the term telling us how the evil the war was."

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