

How can blind people 'watch' fireworks? Taking a hands-on approach to describe fireworks to the blind

BY CHERYL CHAN, THE PROVINCE JULY 29, 2015



Collin van Uchelen, who's working as part of Vocaley to try a new way of 'translating' fireworks for the visually impaired, with his dog Rico at English Bay in Vancouver on Tuesday. Instead of just using words to describe fireworks, a sighted person will also be tracing their fingers on the back of the blind person to describe aspects of the show. Nick Procajlo/PNG

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, PNG

Can blind people “watch” the fireworks?

On Wednesday, on bleachers overlooking the crowded beach and the [Honda Celebration of Light](#) barge moored in English Bay, a group of eight — some blind, some sighted — are going to give it a try.

“We’re going to see if it works,” said Collin van Uchelen. “I’m trusting myself that it’ll be phenomenal and will open the door to a level of participation that’s never been available to blind people before.”

Van Uchelen loves the fireworks. He's been trooping religiously to English Bay for [the annual show since 1992](#). But because of a degenerative eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa, which affects the photoreceptor cells in his retina, the dazzling display of [colour and light](#) dims each passing year.

These days, he doesn't see much of the brilliant explosions — a flash, a blur, perhaps a smudge of light. But he still joins the throngs that crowd onto the beaches encircling the bay to be part of the experience.

Last year, he approached [Vocaleye](#), a local non-profit that offers live descriptive service of art and cultural events for the blind about “translating” the fireworks.

Vocaleye has provided live description to about 300 people with vision loss. This year, it's narrating 20 shows, including The Lion King and Les Miserables. But van Uchelen's request was a first, said executive director Stephane Kirkland.

His request “pointed out to me my unconscious assumption about what blind people may or may not be interested in viewing,” she said, adding it's a similar assumption that she heard from some theatre companies during Vocaleye's early days when they were told: “Blind people don't come to the theatre.”

Kirkland, [a trained describer](#), and van Uchelen went to one of last year's fireworks performances and she gave him a play-by-play of the pyrotechnics. They had both brushed up on their fireworks lingo, so they knew the differences between a comet and a candle or a peony and a chrysanthemum. Yet it wasn't enough.

“It became apparent to both of us early on that words are not enough to describe the complexity of the fireworks,” said van Uchelen. “The movement, the spread, the intensity of the effects ... Words cannot do it justice.”

Kirkland likened the experience to describing dance: Near impossible for the describer and not very satisfying to the listener.

For this year's fireworks, they're adding something new to the verbal cues — finger works.

The sighted person uses their hands and fingers to trace the fireworks on the blind person's back, using the waist as the barge, the shoulders as mid-sky and the head for “really high-up sky.” Using fingers lets them express things such as the firework's trajectory and speed, pattern and movement.

“It's tracing fire,” said van Uchelen, who has had friends do it for him in the past. “Having someone drawing that out on my skin as it's occurring completes the picture in a way that's elegant and doesn't interfere with the music.”

Kirkland said this is the first time she's heard of this technique being offered to describe fireworks. If Wednesday's trial run works, Vocaleye would offer the service next year to more clients. It would also create online tutorials that can teach friends and family of blind people some techniques.

Van Uchelen hopes their new method can make the fireworks more accessible.

“As spectators, we are drawn in by the magic and beauty of the moment,” he said. With this, “we as blind people can become part of that shared moment, too.”

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What: **[Honda Celebration of Light](#)** — featuring Brazil.

When: Wednesday, 10 p.m. (road closures are in effect from 7:30 p.m. in the West End).

Best free viewing spots: English Bay, along Beach Avenue, Sunset Beach, Kitsilano Beach and Vanier Park.

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