

# CITY LIFE

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## FOURTH CELEBRATIONS

Sam Hummel is ready to recreate his Uncle Sam character for this year's Fun Fourth Festival in downtown Greensboro  
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# Sam I am

## Greensboro man has played nation's uncle for several years

BY ALEXANDREA RAVENELLE  
Staff Writer

A young boy, about 5 or 6 years old, once approached Sam Hummel as he played Uncle Sam at the Fun Fourth festival in downtown Greensboro.

"I can say the Pledge of Allegiance," the boy said, placing his right hand over his heart and reciting the pledge in its entirety.

Before the child was finished with his recitation, Hummel was reduced to tears.

"What he saw was the spirit of the country," Hummel said. "That made it all worthwhile."

Even as he repeats the story from the comfort of his corner office on the eighth floor of First Union building, Hummel, 62, is moved once again. His eyes become red-rimmed, and a tear appears on each wrinkled cheek.

A tall, thin man in a charcoal suit and wire-rimmed glasses, only his fly-away white hair reveals Hummel's once-a-year Uncle Sam persona. He's in the process of growing out the cloud-like strands in an effort to get into character and to look more like the typical Uncle Sam.

"This is my donation to Fun Fourth," he said. "I'll get a haircut the fifth."

Hummel has played the role of Uncle Sam at the annual festival for the past three or four years. Laura Phillips, the executive director of Grassroots Productions, the fiscal agent for Fun Fourth, asked him to take the role when the previous Uncle Sam became unavailable.

When asked why she wanted him to portray the figure, the reason Phillips gave was not quite what he expected.

She told him he would be cheaper than the other candidate under consideration because he wouldn't need a wig.

As a consultant for Merrill Lynch, Hummel's financial mindset won out, and he soon found himself working Fun Fourth as a wigless Uncle Sam.

For him, the role represents more than a chance to save Grassroots Productions (of which he's president) a few extra dollars; it's a chance for him to tap into patriotism and idealism.

"What Uncle Sam represents is a sense of country," he said.

Hummel makes a variety of appearances as Uncle Sam during the festival. He rides the same float as the local elected dignitaries and officials and walks the perimeter of the festival throughout the day.

He said the hardest part of the job isn't the walking but riding on the float. He tries to make contact with everyone on the parade route and to look directly into their eyes.



SCOTT HOFFMANN/News & Record

Sam Hummel says he tries to make eye contact with people along the parade route. "It validates their presence," he says. Above, he greets festival-goers at a past Fun Fourth.

"Eye contact is very important," he said. "It validates their presence. They're not just seeing something, someone's seeing them."

It's the only part of the job that he considers work, he said; all the rest is fun.

The festival organizers provide Hummel with his Uncle Sam costume, from his blue topcoat down to his red and white striped pants. The outfit is old and rather shabby, but Hummel doesn't want the costume to be replaced.

"I don't want people to think that Uncle Sam is spending too much of the government's money on himself," he said.

Hummel wants his other Sam personality to be an ambassador for elected officials as they reach out to the people. He wants to portray the best part of the country and show its caring side, but the role does have difficulties.

"It's very difficult to be named Sam and do this," he said. "I can't help but think momentarily that anyone who says, 'Hey Sam,' is someone who knows me personally."

Constantly turning around to see who is calling his name leaves him with whiplash at the end of the day, but he won't quit.

"I'm not a professional Uncle Sam," he said. "I'm a volunteer Uncle Sam. It's not my persona."

As the day wears on and the festival-goers become hot and cranky,

some tend to take it out on Uncle Sam.

"The crowd gets surly in the afternoon, and they want to know where their refund checks are," he said. "I tell them the truck has left Washington and should be here by 5:30 or 6."

No one has taken him up on his offer to meet him and receive their refund check later that evening, he said.

Hummel has a history of volunteering for the city. He has assisted with City Stage in the fall, even going to the extent of purchasing a kiddie ride for the festival. He used to recruit his children to test out the ride, help set it up and clean it up.

His family has supported his volunteering for Fun Fourth, too. They tell him they're not embarrassed by his Uncle Sam role but relieved to be helping him with something that doesn't involve their physical labor.

"They're glad to see me move on to something a little less demanding," he said.

Although walking around under a hot July sun can be difficult and demanding, Hummel enjoys his role as the country's persona.

"It's a fun thing to do. It's self-serving in that all the income (from the kiddie ride) went to Carolina Theatre, but I get to keep all the grins. And I still get to keep all the grins," Hummel said. "That's an invaluable part of the job."



JAMES PARKER/News & Record

Sam Hummel places a small American flag in the hand of the O. Henry character Red Chief at the O. Henry statue in downtown Greensboro.