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Illuminate and Elation Light Mount Rushmore for Historic Freedom 250 Celebration

Extreme distances. Demanding outdoor conditions. Proteus meets the challenge of illuminating Mount Rushmore from distances of up to 600 feet

Full-service production company Illuminate had a busy Freedom 250, providing lighting for two of the nation's most high-profile celebrations. One of those was the Freedom 250 event at Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota on July 3, where a dynamic Elation lighting system complemented a spectacular fireworks display beneath the iconic memorial.

The celebration was a powerful tribute to 250 years of American independence set against the backdrop of one of our nation's most iconic memorials. It also marked the return of fireworks to Mount Rushmore for the first time since 2020, and featured keynote remarks from President Donald Trump, military honors, historical presentations and tributes, military bands, aviation flyovers, and a patriotic fireworks and light show.



Illuminate and Pyro Spectaculars

Pyro Spectaculars produced the fireworks design and production, while Illuminate's Caleb Franke designed and programmed the complementary light show. Illuminate collaborated with Pyro Spectaculars on a 20-minute presentation that brought lighting and fireworks together in a carefully choreographed visual narrative, rather than treating them as separate elements.



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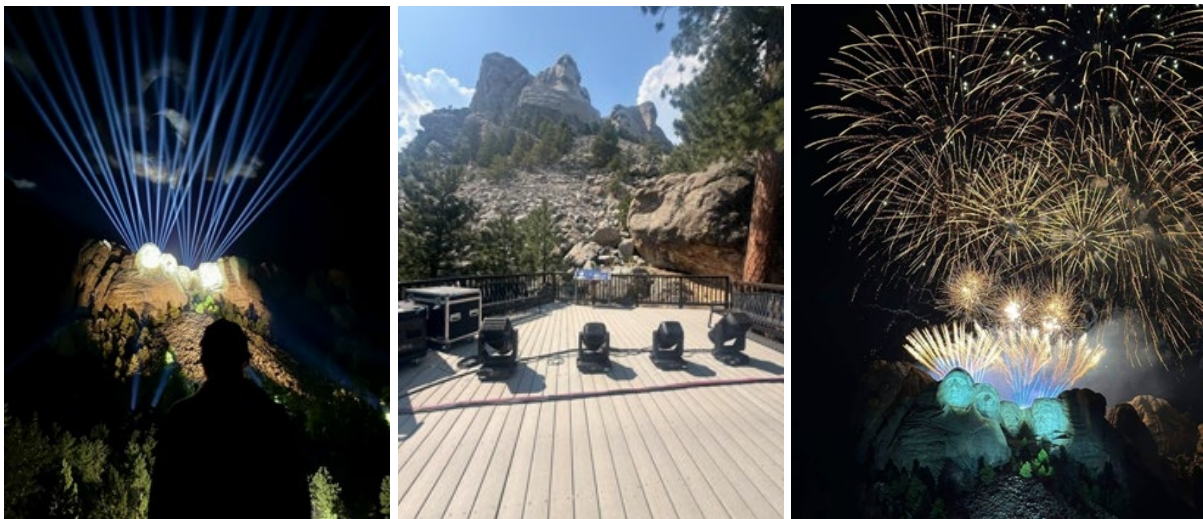
“We really worked to make the fireworks and lighting complement each other,” says Franke. “It was a patriotic show with a storytelling element, with fireworks, moments with just lights, and moments where they worked together. It all came together in one highly impactful show.”

Illuminate became involved in the project through its long-standing relationship with Pyro Spectaculars, which the company works with annually on the Space Needle New Year’s Eve show in Seattle. Pyro Spectaculars had also produced the 2020 Mount Rushmore fireworks display, and its experience using lighting to complement fireworks at the Space Needle helped establish the concept for adding lighting to the Mount Rushmore event.

Lighting an American Icon

Working in one of the U.S.’s most popular National Parks presented a unique set of challenges. Access, environmental considerations, and the need to protect the memorial and surrounding terrain meant that Illuminate had limited opportunities to test the design on site.

“It’s complicated when you’re working in a National Park,” Franke explains. “Because Pyro Spectaculars had done it before, the Park really trusted them, which helped them to really trust us. It was a very smooth and easy process working with the Park.”



Elation Gear

Illuminate made a significant investment in Elation equipment for the Freedom 250 projects, and deployed a combination of high-output wash, beam, profile and panel fixtures across the Mt. Rushmore site.

Key to the design were 16 Elation [**Proteus Brutus**](#) fixtures positioned at various locations along the Presidential Trail, which leads down to the Grand View Terrace that provides visitors with a close-up view of Mount Rushmore. The powerful 75,000-lumen LED wash/FX fixtures were used to illuminate the four presidential faces from multiple angles.



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“We had the Brutus fixtures positioned approximately 300 to 600 feet from the faces, so output was a major consideration during the design process,” says Franke, adding that with limited opportunities for advance testing, he had some initial concerns about whether the fixtures would have enough power at those distances.

“The math seemed okay, but reality can be different,” he says. “I was a little bit concerned, but when we got them there and shined them up on the faces, I could see they would be fine. It was almost too much power. It was perfect, actually.”

Six Elation [Proteus Atlas](#) ultra-long-throw beam FX fixtures were also positioned along the trail, creating aerial beam effects that complemented the fireworks and interacted with the pyrotechnics' smoke. With its laser-pumped phosphor light engine and highly concentrated beam, the Atlas gave Illuminate the reach needed to create visible aerial effects across the expansive site.

“The thing about the Atlas is the beam—it just goes on forever,” Franke says. “It comes out of the lens, and it just doesn’t stop.”

Illuminate also deployed 10 Elation [Proteus Lucius](#) LED profile fixtures along the trail to light the rock surrounding the presidential faces, adding color, gobos and animation effects to create texture across the memorial.



Up on the Mountain

Getting equipment into position presented another logistical challenge, with a high-line rigging team enabling the crew to transport gear up the mountain. Four positions above the memorial each housed six Elation [Proteus Excalibur](#) beam fixtures and three Elation [Pulse Panel FX](#) fixtures, with pyrotechnic equipment interspersed among the lighting.

The Excalibur fixtures produced powerful aerial beam effects from above the presidential heads, while the Pulse Panel FX fixtures illuminated the smoke from the fireworks.

Behind the presidential faces is a small canyon where the larger aerial fireworks were launched. The lower, shorter fireworks were positioned on the mountain itself, meaning that smoke from the aerial shells frequently drifted directly in front of the lighting positions.



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“All of the aerial shells were being shot in front of the lights, and it created a lot of smoke,” Franke explains. “We were able to light the smoke really well with the Pulse Panel FX and highlight the really cool atmosphere above the heads in that space. That worked really well.”

The positioning of the fixtures also allowed Illuminate to create dramatic effects without distracting the audience from the memorial itself. “From most perspectives, you could not see the lenses of any of the lights,” Franke says. “It was just the beams in the air or the color that was pushing off into the air. It worked very well.”

Obsidian Control Systems equipment was also used on the project, with Illuminate deploying [Netron EN12](#) Ethernet-to-DMX nodes and [DMX10-5](#) splitters to distribute lighting control data across the site.

Patriotic Color and Texture

Color played an important role throughout the show, with Illuminate making extensive use of red, white, and blue looks across the memorial. “We used a lot of red, white and blue on the faces, and being able to pull those colors directly from the color wheel looked great,” says Franke, who adds that there were also CMY color moments. The Proteus Brutus fixtures also provided animation effects, while the Proteus Lucius units added texture with gobos and animation.

A Dramatic New Look

The event lighting presented Mount Rushmore in a vastly different way than its everyday illumination. Rather than flattening the memorial with uniform illumination, the Illuminate design cast light on each face from multiple angles and controlled shadows to give the faces a more dramatic appearance.

“It was a bit more moody compared to the lights they have illuminating the faces daily,” Franke says. “It made it look a little eerie, I guess you could say, or theatrical looking, which I thought was a good thing. We were a bit concerned about the bottom-up lighting that can create some shadowing, but it all looked just fine.”

Lighting and Fireworks Tell the Story

The entire show was created in previs and tightly coordinated between Illuminate and Pyro Spectaculars’ fireworks designer Kevin Gilfillan. The collaboration allowed the two disciplines to create moments where the lighting enhanced the fireworks, and others where it carried the visual focus on its own.

“We’re always looking for creative ways to use lighting to bring a concept to life and on this project worked to make it all come together with the fireworks,” says Franke. “Kevin and I worked really close together on making sure there were moments for both. It’s not just a million shells of fireworks for 20 minutes—it tells more of a story.”



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A Special Project

The Mount Rushmore project represented one of the most significant and memorable projects in Illuminate's history, combining an extraordinary location, a historical event, and the technical and logistical challenges of working within a National Park.

Rick Franke, President at Illuminate, commented, "Being part of America's 250th celebration at Mount Rushmore is an extraordinary honor for all of us at Illuminate Production Services. There are few places that represent the history, scale and spirit of this country quite like Mount Rushmore. Our team has spent decades helping bring ambitious ideas to life, but contributing our work to a moment of this significance is something special. I'm incredibly proud of the men and women of Illuminate who brought their talent, professionalism and commitment to this project, and grateful for the opportunity to play a small part in celebrating 250 years of America. I also want to give a special thanks to The National Parks Services and the State of South Dakota. This event would not have happened without their leadership and vision."

Caleb Franke added, "We love our country, so being a part of such a historic day was both special and a real honor. There were probably five or six big, high-profile shows that happened over the 4th of July, and for us to be involved on two of those is just a complete honor. On top of that, the Elation fixtures performed really well with no issues, and the client was super happy with how it all worked out, as well as how we took care of the National Park."

In fact, Illuminate received strong praise for both the finished show and the care taken in working within the requirements of the National Park, with the company receiving a letter from the Department of the Interior expressing appreciation for the event.

About Illuminate

Headquartered in California with a complementary full-service East Coast shop in Florida, Illuminate is a privately-owned rental, live event production, touring, and equipment sales and installation company. Founded in 2006 by Rick and Sherece Franke, Illuminate is celebrating 20



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years of steady nationwide growth as a respected full-service production company.
www.IlluminateProduction.co, 855-468-6477.

About Elation

At Elation, we collaborate with leading professionals in the lighting industry to help bring extraordinary experiences to life. As a designer and manufacturer of a wide range of high-performance entertainment lighting products, we're proud to be a trusted partner to top lighting professionals and production/rental houses around the world. Our commitment to quality, innovation, and creative solutions has made us a go-to resource in the industry. We also offer an advanced line of lighting control products through Obsidian Control Systems, and a full range of dependable specialty effects called Magmatic. Elation serves clients worldwide through offices in Los Angeles, Mexico City, Canada, and the Netherlands. We invite you to take a closer look at elationlighting.com

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