

City Weekly

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE JUNE 29, 2003



Other state plates

AUCIT
AVGDAD
AVGMOM
BOSS
BOSTUN
CAPER
CTRFEL
CUCA
GODCAN
JOCODL
MYCAAR
NEWST
NEWTON
OURCAH
RAAAAR
RUNNER
SOUTHE
TAXMAN
VAMPYR
VANITY
VIPNH
WAAAAA
WRITER
YANKIE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Somerville's Gigi Meenan with her "ROCK ON" mantra; Charlestown's Rebecca Lindland with her "PETITE" plate; "MAFIA" man Lucas Brunelle of the Fenway; and grandfather (or "NONNO") Ralph Piemonte of West Roxbury and four of his five grandchildren.

You're so vain

With vanity plates a \$4.2 million statewide industry, you probably think this story's about you

Story by Johnny Diaz
GLOBE STAFF

Photography by Justin Kase Conder

At every stop sign, at every traffic light, they're in your FACE.*

They are VANITY PLATES, those AUTO ego monikers that scream from the front and rear of cars.

They tease with their assortment of letters and numbers as if daring a driver or pedestrian to decipher the inside

*All capitalized words are actual Massachusetts vanity plates.

joke.

Some name plates are COOL, others are GOOFY. Some make folks scratch their HEADS.

With 52,000 of them on Massachusetts roads, they have become a steady stream of revenue for the state. Drivers here pay about \$4.2 million a year to advertise their job, name, town, height, hobby, initials, favorite sports team — you NAME it.

The plate, some of these drivers say, adds the finishing touch to their beloved car. Produced by inmates in Walpole, it's the icing on their car cake.

As travelers hop into their wheels for summer road trips,

we decided to track down the stories behind some of the more interesting vanity plates spotted in and around Boston.

Just who are these drivers willing to fork over \$61 a year for the privilege?

"A license plate can be a way to distinguish the car, whether it's a funny word, a phrase, or a desirable low number," said David Shaw, spokesman for the Registry of Motor Vehicles, where 600 to 800 requests for such plates roll in monthly. Shaw, who has the standard \$41-renew-every-two-year plate, says there are two camps when drivers step

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They're so vain, and not shy at the plate

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to the plate.

"You have people who don't want their plate to be memorable and people who do," he said. "A lot of people see the vehicle as an extension of their personality and the license plate is a way to further distinguish that personality."

Plates in Massachusetts can't be more than six letters and they have to begin with two letters — not numbers — because of a restriction in the Registry's computer system.

That wasn't always the case. Plates have been around in Massachusetts since 1903, when the state Legislature directed motorists to be licensed and to have a registration plate on their car, Shaw said. Many of the initial plates were single and double digits and have been kept in families for generations, meaning they are still out on the road.

The first, appropriately: 01. It was requested by Frederick Tudor, and came out 100 years ago this September.

There is such a high demand for such single- and double-digit plates that the Registry holds a special lottery each September for plates with four or fewer number characters. As the plates become available, they are randomly distributed among a pool of numerical-digit-plate seekers.

Shaw, who can talk about plates incessantly, rattles off some of the more memorable ones that rolled through his office: ITLFLY bedecks a Dodge Viper or SEATS8 describes the spaciousness of a Chevrolet Caprice.

Like a Social Security number, no two people can have the same plate, although many residents are creative enough to find a way around a tag already spoken for.

There are, for example, 19 versions of REDSOX, from REDSOC to REDSX. Drivers have spun 50 takes on the word JEEP, from JEEEEP to JEEPS.

And there are four variations of the word "topless." In May, one commuter complained about the TOPLSS plate on the 1998 Ford Mustang of Jeff Sinkiewicz of Brockton. The case attracted media attention and was a cause for concern at the Registry, highlighting First Amendment and freedom of speech rights.

Join the club

Vanity plates can be ordered for private passenger, commercial, motorcycle, bus, camper or antique vehicles. All vanity plates must begin with two letters. The plate can be no more than six characters, or a maximum of five characters for motorcycle plates. Profane words won't be allowed.

To order a plate, you must visit any full service Registry branch and complete the "application for vanity plates." Up to three plates can be made on one application. To order by phone, call 617-351-4500 and pay with a credit card. Cost of the vanity plates are \$50 to order the plate, then a \$20 swap fee. Annual renewal, which is in November for vanity plates, is \$81.

For more information on plates and which ones are already taken, visit <http://www.state.ma.us/rmv/vanity/index.htm>

The general rule at the Registry: If someone complains about a plate, it may be pulled over.

The Registry plays a sort of a Banned-in-Boston role, taking its own stab at determining good taste and decency. No violence or drugs (yep, no LSD), and few religious references. (God, however, exists — He may have been grandfathered.)

Yet some unsavory plates squeak by. TOPLSS, at least to one motorist, was offensive.

Registry officials reviewed that case and felt otherwise. "I don't think it was meant to be offensive," said Shaw. "It was meant to be funny," noting that the naughty Mustang is indeed a convertible, which owner Sinkiewicz pointed out as he pleaded his case. "Initially we were taking steps to bring that plate back," said Shaw, "but reason prevailed." So the Mustang remains TOPLSS.

Hey kids, rock 'n' roll

For Somerville's Gigi Meenan, a vanity plate reflects her mantra in life. Hers: ROCK ON.

Meenan has had that plate since 1982, when she performed in a rock band while living in Sudbury.

"I was a big old singer in a rock 'n' roll band. We were all girls and did horrible music," said Meenan. "I sent in a bunch of different variations on my name and anything else that would personalize my project. And that's what was avail-

able. I about swallowed my tongue when I saw the approved application."

Although she no longer performs on stage, she still rocks on, grooving in her car.

What does it say about Meenan, now an administrative assistant?

"That I used to be cool. Of all the things I have ever spent money on, that vanity plate was my wisest expenditure," said Meenan, who treated her husband to a vanity plate for his 1988 Harley-Davidson sportster. That plate reads: BYKEY.

The ROCK ON plate has bedecked each of her cars over the years, beginning with a 1974 MGB, then a 1975 Datsun station wagon, a Chevy Blazer, a Honda Accord, and now her 1980 Chevrolet Corvette.

"The plate is the happiest it's ever been on the Corvette," she said.

As Meenan drives around Somerville, other commuters gesture, arms raised, fists clenched, as if they were in the front rows encouraging The Boss. "Rock On!"

In West Roxbury, Ralph Piemonte sometimes gets an endearing reaction when pedestrians walk in front of his 2001 Nissan Altima.

They call out, "nonno!"

That's the Italian word for grandfather, something he's proud to say he is five times over.

"With all the titles and positions attained throughout my life, no sound is as sweet as my grandchildren calling out for nonno," said Piemonte, 62. "An unexpected pleasure is the enjoyment I get while stopped at a crosswalk, red light, et cetera, and a stranger calls out 'Hi Nonno!'"

Next to his Altima in his driveway is his wife's 2003 Toyota Corolla. Nancy Piemonte, grandmother of five, is NONNA5.

A real estate assessor for the city of Boston, Ralph Piemonte had hoped to nab TAXMAN, but it was already taken. He's sticking with NONNO for now.

Popular in the North End

There's a MAFFIA in the Fenway and Lucas Brunelle drives it. We're talking about his 1987 Ford Crown Victoria, a retired state police car, that he bought at a police

auction.

"I got that plate as a parody on our government" said Brunelle, who left the car with its limo-tint, police-car windows. When parking in the North End to visit friends, Brunelle has had "a couple of old-timers come up to me (and) tell me about scandals from pinball machines to finding a gun in a microwave oven. People ask me if I am in the Mafia. I have answered yes."

He is part of another organized group that has courted controversy — a crew that travels on two wheels. Brunelle takes part in the controversial monthly take-back-the-streets rides by the loosely organized cycling group Critical Mass. He often hitches a trailer and tows a sofa, or sometimes a band, through Boston's roadways.

Brunelle, a computer instructor who bikes almost everywhere, even to work, says "people are surprised that I have a car. I only use it for bike races and to take people to the polls."

Another little car folks make a big fuss over: Rebecca Lindland's Mini Cooper. Appropriately, her plate reads: PETITTE.

"The plate sort of embodied my car and my life," said Lindland, an automotive analyst who bought the dark silver Mini last summer. "The fact that I am five feet tall makes it even funnier."

A clone of the car is featured in the movie "The Italian Job," in which a trio of Minis are used in a heist. The Charlestown resident hoped to get a plate that stated SO-SHAG — a nod to Austin Powers' shagadelic take on the Mini's previous mid-'60s boom — but then she realized that it could also be read as SOS HAG.

"I knew when I was getting the car that I had to get a plate for a car that is ridiculously cute," said Lindland. "My whole life I have loved cars, and the car in America is an extension of a personality more so than any other country."

Lindland is used to the stares — and laughs — from pedestrians as they cross in front of her Mini at traffic lights.

"It's a metal version," says Lindland, "of fuzzy dice."

Johnny Diaz, who doesn't have a vanity plate but wishes he did, may be reached at jodiaz@globe.com.