

# BEVAIN: Taking causes, messages to cars with plate talk

Stefan Lonce

They are almost everywhere in the Lower Hudson Valley and beyond, wherever there are motor vehicles. They tell the shortest of stories, or promote causes, in eight or fewer characters. They are minimalist poetry in motion. They are great conversation-starters that can turn strangers into neighbors, and neighbors into friends.

"They" are vanity license plates, and they are very popular: there are 9.3 million "vanitized" motor vehicles in the United States, about 4 percent of registered motor vehicles. I worked with officials from the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, which represents the American and Canadian DMVs, to conduct the first-ever vanity license plates survey.

New Yorkers have vanitized about 287,000 vehicles (2.4 percent of registered vehicles); New York ranks 35th of 51 jurisdictions in the survey. The New York DMV allows eight characters on vanity plates, and charges an ex-

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tra \$25 each year for the plates (plus a \$43 application fee).

Vanity plates empower motorists to express themselves. Hudson Valley motorists have vanitized with many clever, celebratory, and sometime cryptic plates that are intriguing conversation-starters. For example, Alison Masry and her husband Rudolph, from Briarcliff Manor, are often asked about their complementary "DONOR" and "DONEY" vanity plates, which celebrate Ally's donation of a kidney to Rudy, who suffered from end-stage renal failure.

Jay Siegel, from Wesley Hills, was a founding member of the Tokens, whose 1961 hit song was "The Lion Sleeps Tonight"; his vanity plate is the song's chorus, "WIMOWEH." The plate inspires some observers to sing ("In the jungle, the mighty jungle ...").

Many Hudson Valley businesses have vanitized, enabling them to promote

themselves to thousands of people every day. York Limousine in Millwood has vanitized with plates that say "YORK"; Liller Bobcat Service in Hawthorne has vanitized its construction vehicles with "BOBCAT" plates; New Rochelle radio station WVOX proclaims its call letters on vanitized vehicles.

State regulations prohibit vanitized messages that are "obscene, lewd, lascivious, derogatory to a particular ethnic or other group, or patently offensive."

The U.S. Supreme Court has held that the First Amendment's right to freedom of speech applies to license plates. In 2007, Long Island motorist Arno Herwerth sued the DMV after the officials revoked his "GETOSAMA" vanity plate; they settled the case by allowing Herwerth to keep his plate, which encourages observers to talk with him about why Osama bin Laden is still apparently alive and free.

It's difficult for DMV officials to establish and apply screening rules that proscribe truly offensive vani-

tized messages, while allowing messages (such as GETOSAMA) that, although objectionable to some, are constitutionally protected. That's why I proposed the establishment of a national database of prohibited vanity plate messages, compiled with advice from First Amendment experts. AAMVA and DMV officials are considering how to implement the database.

Custom license plates are the first cousins of vanity plates. New York offers almost 250 different custom plates. The organizations that sponsor custom plates receive part of the fees that motorists pay (typically, a \$43 initial plate fee and a \$25 annual renewal fee, and \$25 more each year for vanitized plates).

Custom plates empower organizations, such as universities, sports teams and state agencies, to promote themselves or their causes. For example, the LOVE YOUR LIBRARY custom plate helps fund the state's library's statewide Summer Reading Program for children. The Masrys each have



Frank Becerra Jr./The Journal News  
Jorge Beale Jr. displays the vanity plates on his 2003 Audi A4 in the parking lot of Kohls on Central Ave in Yonkers, June 17, 2004.

vanitized DONATE LIFE custom plates, which encourage organ donations.

Vanity plates are fascinating and fun. I encourage Journal News readers to scope out vanity plates and start conversations: Ask the motorists about the stories or causes that inspired them to vanitize. Wouldn't we all

get along better if we just talked to each other more?

The writer lives in Croton-on-Hudson. He is the author of the forthcoming book, "LCNS2ROM — License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the GR8 Stories They Tell." Learn more at [www.LCNS2ROM.com](http://www.LCNS2ROM.com).