



## RONALD REAGAN'S GREATEST UNKNOWN ACCOMPLISHMENT

By Stefan Lonce

While working on a book about the GR8 stories that Americans have told on 9 million vanity license PL8S, I learned that, on August 21, 1970, Governor Ronald Reagan signed legislation authorizing California to issue vanity plates. The law that RR, as I shall call him, signed that day provides that California's vanity plate fees go to a state fund that helps preserve the environment, but almost no one knows about this.

What a GR8 idea! California now *earns* \$38 million each year from the state's 1 million "vanitized" motor vehicles. Since 1970, California has *earned* about \$500 million from vanity plates, and used that money to fight pollution, and to conserve undeveloped land and endangered wildlife.

While searching for a photograph of RR signing California's vanity plates law (none exists), I learned about a collection of joyful photos of RR and NDR, as I shall call Nancy Davis Reagan, taken by *Sacramento Bee* photographers while RR was governor, from January 2, 1967 – January 2, 1975.

The photographs of RR, and NDR, with kids, stood out from the others...they made me smile.

Those photos inspired this calendar, and a book with the same title, to be published in 2011, when we will celebrate the Centennial of RR's birth, on February 6, 2011.



RR and NDR had two kids: Ron, and Patti, who wrote, "It took me many years to really appreciate...how valuable photographs can be. They are...links to memory."



*The Reagan family in 1976 (left to right): Patti, Nancy, Ronald, Michael, Maureen & Ron.*

RR also had two kids from his first marriage: Maureen (now deceased), and Michael, who called RR, "the greatest man I've ever known."

As his kids would tell you, RR was a good listener, a voracious reader, and a compelling writer and speaker; his greatest strengths were his intellect, humor, empathy, optimism, and tenacity. In his autobiography, *An American Life*, RR explained how his mother, Nelle, inspired him by saying, "If something went wrong, you didn't let it get you down: You stepped away from it, stepped over it, and moved on."

RR always found opportunity in adversity. When his movie career dried up, he got a job hosting the "General Electric Theater" TV show in 1954. As part of his deal with GE, one of America's most innovative and creative companies, RR spoke with, and listened to, 250,000 GE employees around the USA; those tours were critical to his later success in politics.

Elected on November 8, 1966, Governor Reagan helped California's kids by increasing education funding, and by cutting waste and fraud while increasing welfare benefits for the neediest families. Gov. Reagan embraced innovative programs, like "Project Sandlot" (July 2011 photo). As California's First Lady, NDR mentored disadvantaged kids as a Foster Grandparent. I will tell you more about what RR did as governor, and president, for kids, in my book, *RR♥KIDZ*.

To help California's environment, Gov. Reagan preserved wilderness areas, added to the state's parks, and signed anti-smog legislation. Pollution is particularly harmful to kids:

asthma is chronic among kids in polluted neighborhoods.

RR proved he was an "entrepreneurial environmentalist" by promoting vanity plates. On October 26, 1970, a week



before Election Day, he held a drawing for some of the most popular plates, including **NO SMOG**; the most requested plate was **PEACE**. Vanity plates were unexpectedly popular: 10,000 Californians had applied for the first plates.

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On November 3, 1970, Gov. Reagan was reelected, by 500,000 votes. RR's vanity plate promotional campaign also succeeded: plates like **HOHOHO** were the number one Christmas gifts in Southern California in 1970.

After he was reelected, RR continued to promote vanity plates; in 1973, he presented a "Certificate of Appreciation" to the Californian who ordered plate No. 100,000.

Forty years after RR held the vanity plates drawing, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger held a similarly CRE8IV media event, on June 28, 2010, to promote California's **Arts** special license plate. Special plates have distinct designs and promote organizations or causes; the **Arts** plate fees go to the California Arts Council, and help fund its "Artists in Schools" program for kids and communities.



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Like Gov. Schwarzenegger, I also had been emulating RR (unknowingly), by advocating that states should *earn* more money from license plates, without raising taxes or mandatory fees. Every state issues vanity plates, as do nine Canadian provinces. Americans have vanitized 9.3 million motor vehicles, and Canadians have vanitized 440,000 vehicles, according to a survey I conducted with the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators in 2007.

Since 2007, I have been trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade states to promote vanity plates. Because vanity plates tell great stories, DMVs should promote them by holding annual contests for the best story, most poetic, funniest, and other categories of vanity plates. Because so many vanity plates are funny, I have designated April 1st as "Vanity License PL8S Day."

RR would have embraced my ideas for states to *earn* more money from vanity plates, special plates, and standard plates; to learn more about this, please visit my web site, [www.VanityPlatesBook.com](http://www.VanityPlatesBook.com).

Although RR never vanitized, NDR did: her plate said **111 NDR**; I have hidden a simplified image of Nancy Reagan's plate in each photograph...see if you can find it.



In celebration of the centennial of Ronald Reagan's birth, California should issue a Ronald Reagan special plate; the plate fees would go to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation.



When the Postal Service issues a new Ronald Reagan stamp in February 2011, Americans should write letters (remember them?) to friends and family, recounting their memories of Ronald Reagan.

Ronald Reagan, who was a prolific letter-writer, would have liked that.

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