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## The story behind vanity plates

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There are 9.3 million stories out there, all of them hidden behind the cryptic messages of vanity license plates.

That is the emphatic belief of Stefan J. Lonce of Croton, who doesn't look at parking lots the same way the rest of us do. He sees them as gold mines, filled with potentially rich narratives about everyday people.

You might say Lonce, 44, is a little obsessed about vanity plates. He can pretty much tell you everything you want to know about them and more.

For example, you might not know that Pennsylvania issued the first vanity plates in 1931, but limited them to the driver's initials. A few years later, Connecticut allowed messages up to four letters, excluding, of course, the obvious obscenities.

The term "vanity plate" came into common parlance in the mid- 1960s, but most departments of motor vehicles prefer "personalized plates," which lends an air of dignity to a premium concept that accounts for \$200 million in extra annual fees to the DMVs across the land. It may be the most lucrative self-inflicted tax there is.

Lonce can tell you that, of all the 50 states, Virginia has the highest incidence of vanity plates and the lowest fee - 10 bucks. Texas, which arguably has the greatest collective ego in America, paradoxically has the least number of vanity plates per capita.

He can go and on.

But what Lonce is most interested are the stories. To him, vanity plates are portals to a stranger's existence. He calls them "poetry in motion."

If you got a vanity plate that hints at a good personal yarn, well, the chances are Lonce will want to talk to you and record your story for a book he's writing. Appropriately enough, the book's working title is, "LCNS2ROM - License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the Stories They Tell."

Lonce's fixation with vanity plates began one day when he was driving down a road with a friend.

"We were talking," he recalled. "And you know that lull in a conversation, that uncontrollable lull? Well, we reached that."

To fill the dead air, Lonce wondered aloud about a passing car's vanity plate. What did it mean? Was there a story behind it?

"It occurred to me that every one of these vanity plates has a story that's being told," he said. "That's the whole idea behind the vanity plate. They're a story-telling device. Some of these stories are just so good.

"You're looking into someone else's life. It's amazing."

He started to collect the stories, first by placing fliers on car windshields. Eventually, his employer at The Dining Times in Hawthorne helped out.

The company makes advertising place mats for diners. Occasionally a spot on a place mat would go unsold and Lonce's boss ("a really nice guy") would give him free space to solicit vanity plate holders.

"The response has been unreal," Lonce said. "People really want their stories told."

The place-mat gimmick led Lonce to Ally and Rudy Masry of Briarcliff. Ally's vanity plate says DONOR and Rudy's says DONEE. It turned out that in 2003, Ally donated a kidney to her husband, who was in the final stages of renal failure.

"I think their story is one of the most wonderful love stories I've ever heard," Lonce said. "They've been married over 40 years and she gave a kidney to him. You know something? She's literally always with her husband. Isn't that a wonderful love story?"

It's going in the book.

As is the inspiring story behind RAFLPRIZ (RAFFLE PRIZE). This one features a couple of great people whom I happened to interview for a story many years ago - Jason Kingsley and his mom, Emily.

Jason was born with Down syndrome in 1974. The doctor advised Emily that it would be best to put the boy in an institution, an idea she fiercely rejected. How right she was.

Raised at home, Jason learned to read when he was 4. He graduated from high school and now lives in a group residence. Along the way, he became a nationally recognized spokesman for people with disabilities. He co-authored a book and appeared in several TV shows, including "Sesame Street," for which his mother worked as an Emmy Award-winning writer.

A few years ago at a fundraiser for the Special Olympics and for the Westchester Association for Retarded Citizens, Emily won a BMW in a raffle. Hence, RAFLPRIZ, a vanity plate that carries more meaning behind it than just a chance winning of a car.

For his book, Lonce would like to hear from anyone in North America. That includes Canadians, eh? His online repository is [www.lcns2rom.com](http://www.lcns2rom.com).

In the meantime, Lonce encourages car owners to "vanitize," or at least appreciate those who do. By the way, he's not talking about the wiseacres who pull off trick plates where the true meaning has to be read in a mirror, e.g. 3MTA3. (Get it?)

Lonce's mission is motivated by a touching sweetness. It's all about breaking the ice in a cold world and getting to know your neighbor.

"You know something?" he said. "If we all understood a little about each other, wouldn't we get along just a little better? That wouldn't be a bad thing."

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