

Vanity plates: Poetry in motion or ego on wheels?

By Dena Potter
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RICHMOND, Va. — URSOVAIN, Virginia.

You, too, New Hampshire and Illinois. A state-by-state survey of the popularity of vanity license plates has found that car and truck owners in Virginia are the vainest of them all.

Of the 9.3 million personalized plates on U.S. roads, about 1 in 10 are in Virginia, according to rankings provided by the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA).

That's 16% of the plates issued by Virginia. New Hampshire came in second with nearly 14%. Illinois had about 13.4%, amounting to nearly 1.3 million plates, the most of any state. Texas had the fewest, with only about 0.5% of drivers personalizing their plates.

Kathy Carmichael's plate says COFENUT, although she is down to just three cups of java a day from eight to 10. "It's a personality thing," says Carmichael, 58, a real estate agent who lives near Richmond. "You get to know something about the person in front of you or who passes you."

Stefan Lonce calls it "minimalist poetry in motion" — telling a story in eight or fewer characters. Lonce, author of the upcoming book *LCNS2ROM — License to Roam: Vanity Plates and the Stories They Tell*, worked with AAMVA to survey vehicle licensing agencies in each state. "A lot of people have stories to tell, and they really want pieces of those stories out there," he says.

Ion Bogdan Vasi, an assistant sociology professor at Columbia University, calls people who personalize their plates "the narcissistic-materialist poets of the 'I' generation. ... They want to tell the world they are special. They wrote an ode to themselves and they want to share it with everybody on the highway."

Why does Virginia have so many personalized plates? "It's only \$10. You can do it online with little effort," says Benjamin Mace, a Virginia Beach Web designer who started CoolPI8z.com, where people post pictures of their vanity plates.