

Parking tickets: She has drive to succeed

By **KIMBERLY ASHTON**
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — Donna Dennis is cruising for scofflaws.

Maybe they didn't have coins. Or they were making a video return pit stop. Maybe they'll say they thought it was a parking space (but they knew it wasn't).

One thing they all have in common: They're all breaking the law. And they're going to pay. Ten dollars.

Supporting role

Profiles of people who help get things done

And they all fear Dennis, because she carries what might be the most dreaded machine in Northampton: The parking-ticket dispenser.

Dennis, 50, has been patrolling the lots, side-streets and meters for more than 11 years and knows her territory and its inhabitants.

As she walks down Pleasant Street her eyes automatically scan the meters, looking for violators.

If you think you can fool her by not turning the meter all the way, so the yellow sign pops up, you're wrong.

You may think putting your hazard lights on as you park illegally buys you a couple of minutes. Wrong again.

And if you even think about double-parking while you grab a cup of coffee to go, you can be sure she's homing in on you.

The desperate have sometime resorted to writing notes ("I'll be right back." "My car broke."). They don't work, either.

The shadier violators have even offered Dennis bribes, sometimes for more than \$10, the ticket fine.

They end up paying the ticket. If they're hard-core offenders, and ignore the tickets, they'll get "the boot."

The boot is a yellow device locked to a car wheel to prevent the car from moving. Dennis often "boots" a couple of cars a day, she said.

It's nothing personal. In fact, Dennis has knowingly ticketed her own sister. And she tickets her friends, too.

"They'll tease me about it. They'll say, 'You gave me a ticket!' and I'll say, 'Yeah,'" Dennis said, laughing.

But they don't get mad, she said. "They know it's my job."

She is one of five parking officers for the city, earning \$28,000 annually for the thankless job that includes looking for overtime meters, ticketing cars parked outside the proscribed lines, ticketing cars where the meter has been "fed" — meaning, there is money in the meter but the car has been there longer than the allotted time — and generally keeping wayward parkers in line.

"I try to be fair with people. I try to treat people the way I'd want to be treated."

At times people get angry when Dennis tickets them.

"You do constantly have to watch your back out here," she said.

Dennis has never been physically attacked by an angry scofflaw, but she has dealt with her share of snippy parkers.

"Some people have an attitude and will snatch the ticket right out of your hand and say something smart," Dennis said.

Parking Director Peter Skaza said Dennis' people skills have been a great boon to his department, whose employees tend to get scapegoated.

"She's one of the best public relations persons I can have out in the



GORDON DANIELS

Donna Dennis is shown here tagging a car on Main Street this week. Among the people she's ticketed in her nearly 12 years on the job have been a State Police trooper, Main Street merchants, and her sister.



GORDON DANIELS

Donna Dennis, one of five parking enforcement officers for the city, uses a hand-held automatic ticket dispenser to issue tickets for parking violators.

field, considering the type of job she has," he said.

Dennis and the four other parking enforcement officers carry radios with them to call dispatch should a person become threatening. She doesn't have the power to arrest people.

But before resorting to something as drastic as arrest, she said, she will try to calm the person down.

"Sometimes I have to let people know I'm doing my job," she said.

A few years ago, Dennis said, a man who verbally attacked her ended up going to court and being ordered to do some community service, she said.

Generally, though, Dennis said she has a good relationship with people in town and it's rare that people get nasty with her.

As she walks around town, she admonishes those who are attempting to park illegally or are waiting in the car, in an illegal spot, for a friend in a store.

As police officer Kenneth Hartwright cruises by on Pleasant Street he points at Donna Dennis, who is walking in front of the Eileen Fisher store.

She sees him and points back, yelling, "Hey you! I'm gonna ticket you!"

They both laugh and Hartwright drives on.

Dennis has, in fact, ticketed a marked

state police cruiser. Once, when she first began. She still gets teased about it.

Minutes earlier, Dennis was yelling to another friend who was driving down the road: "I'm gonna get you!"

She seems to know most Northampton regulars and says there are a lot of new faces in town.

But she doesn't remember specific cars, she said.

"I don't know people's cars out here. I see a violation and I do it and that's it," she said.

Even when she's not on the clock, she can't help but notice parking violations.

"I remember one time I went to Faces and I came out and I said, 'Look at all these violations!'" Dennis said, laughing.

She also recalls walking around town one Sunday and silently rebuffing people parked in front of fire hydrants.

Dennis was born and raised in Holyoke and has lived in Northampton for 24 years. She is single and has three children and three grandchildren.

When not walking on her beat she likes to ... walk. But at the Smith College track. Thankfully, there are no meters there to distract her.

Walking, in fact, is one of her favorite activities and is one of the aspects of

Who, What, Where

Name: Donna Dennis

Age: 50

Occupation: Parking enforcement officer

Address: Holyoke.

About my work: "I remember one time I went to Faces and I came out and I said, 'Look at all these violations!'"

What I love about the job: "I love the outdoors. I love talking to people. I don't care for the winters, but you do what you have to do."

her job she enjoys when the weather is temperate.

Winter is hard on the parking officers, who run outside, nab a few offenders, then scurry back to warmth. They also use their truck a lot during winter.

However, winter might be good for those parkers short on change. If snow banks are high enough to prevent people from paying the meter, they won't get ticketed, Dennis said.

In the meter-monitoring business, good pickings can be found during the summer, when many out-of-towners visit.

Dennis notices that many of the cars she tickets in the summer have out-of-state license plates. And, she said, she's heard lots of visitors gripe about parking in Northampton and vow they'll never come back because parking is too difficult to find.

"Oh, I hear it all the time," Dennis said.

Also, good weather brings out the scofflaws. But rainy weather keeps them in, after their meter expires.

Even the merchants park illegally in front of their stores, Dennis said. And they get ticketed, too.

Dennis is consistent about ticketing because it's her job, not because parking officers make a commission.

"Oh no. I wish. I'd really be going (then)," Dennis said.

But even Dennis isn't the perfect parker. Last month, when dropping her daughter off at the airport she got a ticket.

Did she know she was in violation?

She just gives a look and a smile.

Kimberly Ashton can be reached at kashton@gazettenet.com.