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Capitola's wheelchair cops: the good, the bad and the ugly

BY TOM RAGAN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

CAPITOLA — They're more handy than handicapped, more capable than disabled, more free-ranging than confined the infamous trio of Capitola wheelchair cops.

Although they've been called just about every name in the book, including "Nazi police," perhaps a more accurate term for them would be "revenue generators."

Each year, Oscar Valdez, Ben Irao and Humberto Morales write nearly a half-million dollars worth of parking tickets in a town whose population rises and falls like the tide, peaking at 40,000 residents during the summer and leveling out at 10,000 during the winter.

As Paul Ahern, a bartender at the Fog Bank and good friend, said: "Oh, they may be disabled, but their pens aren't. And you might not see them all the time, but they're always there, right around the corner. You can bet on that. And they make no exceptions. Even the local folks have gotten their share of parking tickets"



A motorist parked in Capitola Village tries to talk his way out of a ticket from Ben Irao and Bert Morales. (Dan Coyro/Sentinel)

But their hard work hasn't come without occasional insult and injury — "battle scars," as they like to put it.

"You've got to have thick skin to be in this job," said Irao, the veteran of the bunch. "We try to take a diplomatic approach to everything, but it doesn't always work out that way"

That's for sure.

They've had pizza thrown in their faces, they say.

They've had motorists who taunt them by tailgating them.

They've even had people who spit in front of the ground they wheel on.

Some people have even gone for the jugular in a moment of rage, asking them point-blank how they wound up in their wheelchairs.

"Some people think we should be sitting at home and collecting welfare," said Morales, 37, born with post-polio and who has never known what it's like to walk. "They do a double-take when they see us, like 'Are you for real?' They think if we're in wheelchairs, then we shouldn't be working for a living"

But under a special section of the state's vehicle code, cities are allowed to hire physically disabled employees for purposes of parking enforcement. It's a clause on which the city of

Capitola has capitalized for decades, recognizing that the size of its 2.2-mile town is perfect fit for wheelchairs instead of those electric carts that you're apt to see around Santa Cruz. The men are employed by the Police Department but are not sworn officers and do not carry guns.

There's a reason these guys have big biceps. They log as many as 18 miles a day during the height of tourism season, wheeling up and down the narrow and steep streets that flank Capitola Village while keeping a peripheral eye on the Capitola Mall on 41st Avenue or the Nob Hill grocery store on Bay Avenue.

Though the vast majority of tickets issued are for expired parking meters and overstaying the two-hour limit, they also keep an eye out for those who park in handicap stalls but aren't really handicapped — a violation and inconvenience they can all relate to on a personal level because they've all been victims of it at one point or another.

"It's usually people just being lazy or making bad choices without really thinking it through," Valdez said.

It's no surprise, then, that the fines for such violations can range from \$375 to \$3,500, which means the situation can sometimes turn ugly — on both ends.

Lately, the officers have been bringing along tape recorders so that they have all conversations on record.

In one tape, a 17-year-old girl starts crying when she and her boyfriend get caught the weekend before the Fourth of July by Valdez, who, incidentally, leads his cohorts in writing tickets per month — roughly 500 of them.

At first, the girl tells Valdez that her grandmother is inside one of the restaurants, but when Valdez goes looking for her with the boyfriend, the boyfriend turns to Valdez in the middle of the street and says with a straight face, "Look, I don't want no trouble, but there is no grandma"

All three officers say they prefer honesty over anything else. Just 'fess your sins up front and there'll be a greater chance that you'll get off. But even those instances are rare, and every now and then someone will try to bribe them.

But as Irao jokingly puts it, "It would take a house in Maui for me to start thinking about it"

And so the officers continue to write tickets in town.

"I think they do a good job and that's all their doing: their jobs," says Ron Lorenzo, a village resident. "They're the eyes and ears of the Police Department. When fights break out and this place is packed on a summer night, they're the first ones here"

In short, they are to Capitola what sand is to the nearby beach.

And yet the insults keep coming, even from an upstanding Watsonville dentist, who once told them to go "suck eggs" in the memo line of the check he made out to the city of Capitola back in the early '90s for \$13.

"Thank you for prescribing that we suck eggs," answered the police chief at the time, Tom Hanna. "We're all doing it and our teeth are whiter than ever"

Contact Tom Ragan at tragan@santacruzsentinel.com.

Ben Irao

Age: 45.

Residence: Santa Cruz County.

Occupation: Traffic officer for Capitola since 1985.

Disability: In a wheelchair since infancy.

Former jobs: IRS clerk in Salinas, UCSC economics student.

Family: Wife of 15 years, Elaine.

Interesting facts: Born in Manilla, Philippines, son of an army dentist.

Hobbies: Likes to put together DVD movies and slideshows and loves old black and white movies.

Oscar Valdez

Age: 41.

Occupation: Parking enforcement officer for city of Capitola since 1987.

Disability: In a wheelchair for 22 years after suffering an accident.

Residence: Monterey County.

Former jobs: Field worker.

Family: Married for five years, one adult daughter.

Interesting facts: Born in Jalisco, Mexico.

Hobbies: Fishing.

Humberto Morales

Age: 37

Occupation: Parking enforcement officer since 1999.

Disability: In a wheelchair since birth.

Residence: Prunedale.

Former jobs: Security officer, receptionist, community services officer for Salinas Police Department.

Family: Wife of 9 years, Christina; twin boys.

Hobbies: Surfing the Net and taking care of the kids.



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