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Female valet party parking service is in the pink

Valettes add a feminine touch to parking cars

by Gillian Pengelly

Baby pink, dove grey and roses? It may not sound like the usual trappings of the business world but for Maureen Sullivan the combination has resulted in a booming business.

The Valettes, Ltd., Sullivan's Redondo Beach company, is an all-female valet parking service which has been providing private party parking in the Los Angeles area for ten years. Starting slowly from one party a week in 1978 to the current average of ten parties a week the company has grown steadily. To keep up with the increased party load the parking service has expanded from three valets to 50 to 60 women, all coordinated by Sullivan.

The South Bay-based company was founded by Sullivan, Sandi Batt and Sheila Taylor as an extra way to make money but soon the popularity of the all-female parking service began to rise within the Hollywood party circuit, and Sullivan left her job as a Beverly Hills shoe store manager to pursue what looked like a promising business venture.

The proposition of working only a few days a week, mostly at night and on weekends, parking cars at the homes of celebrities and socialites and making more than she was as a manager definitely appealed to Sullivan.

"The other two kept jobs and I was the only one to go full time with the Valettes," said the 37-year-old Sullivan, who bears a marked resemblance to actress Goldie Hawn. Although Batt originated the idea for the Valettes after accidentally stepping into a valet parking position, she "got married on me," according to Sullivan and turned over her interest in the business to Sullivan three years ago. Taylor had left the company several years earlier to pursue a career as a mother.

"Sandi came up with the idea when she was working in a restaurant as a waitress and the valet didn't show up for work. Sandi took over and realized how much more she could make parking cars than waitressing. She put the idea to us over cocktails one



Founded as a moonlighting operation, Maureen Sullivan's Valettes parking service has been picked up on the Hollywood party circuit. Now celebrating the company's tenth anniversary, Sullivan has watched the service expand from a staff of three to a current roster of 50 valets. Photo by Dwight Ueda.

night in Beverly Hills and The Valettes were formed."

The initial capital to get the company going didn't come easily for the three women. "It took all our money to get started, and my bank lady had faith in me and gave us the money. In the begin-

ning it seemed like all the money

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ning it seemed like all the money I was making was going back into company but slowly things picked up and we got more and more referrals," Sullivan said.

The Valettes never paid for advertising until last year when Sullivan took out a yellow pages listing. "Most of my parties are thorough referrals. I don't get that many calls out of the Yellow Pages." Instead Sullivan has continued a gimmick the Valettes

started when they first began. "Sheila's husband came up with the idea that we should give out roses," said Sullivan. So they did. As each guest leaves they are presented with a red rose and the business card of the Valettes. "The women love it," Sullivan

said, "And after awhile people began to say, 'We want the girls with the pink outfits and the roses. Our business has been purely a word of mouth thing, and all it takes is for one guest somewhere to see us and then they want us.'"

By passing out roses with business cards attached, the Valettes managed to promote themselves sufficiently to land jobs with the L.A. party crowd, and their star-studded client list is a feather in

Sullivan's cap. "Who would have guessed we would be getting these clients?" said Sullivan. "I started out with Joan Collins and after that I said, 'I got *Dynasty*, next I want *Knotts Landing* and *Falcon Crest*,' and I got them."

The list reads like an index of *Movie Times*: Joan Collins, Linda Evans, Elizabeth Taylor, Chevy Chase, David Frost, Harold Robbins, Gregory Peck, Willie Nelson, Kenny Rogers, The Police, Barbara Streisand, Anthony Newley, Playboy Cable, Giorgios and Michael Caine to pick a few.

On the flip side of word-of-mouth advertising, it can as easily break as make a company and the Indiana-born Sullivan has to carefully screen the girls she employs as Valettes. Just as one good party can bring in more clients so can a bad party, one with long delays getting cars or with damaged cars, ruin a valet service's reputation.

To qualify to be interviewed to be a Valette, one must be able to drive a stick shift and provide Sullivan with a clean driving record from the Department of Motor Vehicles. Most essential of all, though, to be a Valette you have

Valettes

to be female. "It's not that I'm discriminating against men but no males ever answer the ad I run — I guess it's the word *Valette*. I do hire males to handle security and traffic control, but the gimmick of the company is that we are an all-female parking service," said Sullivan.

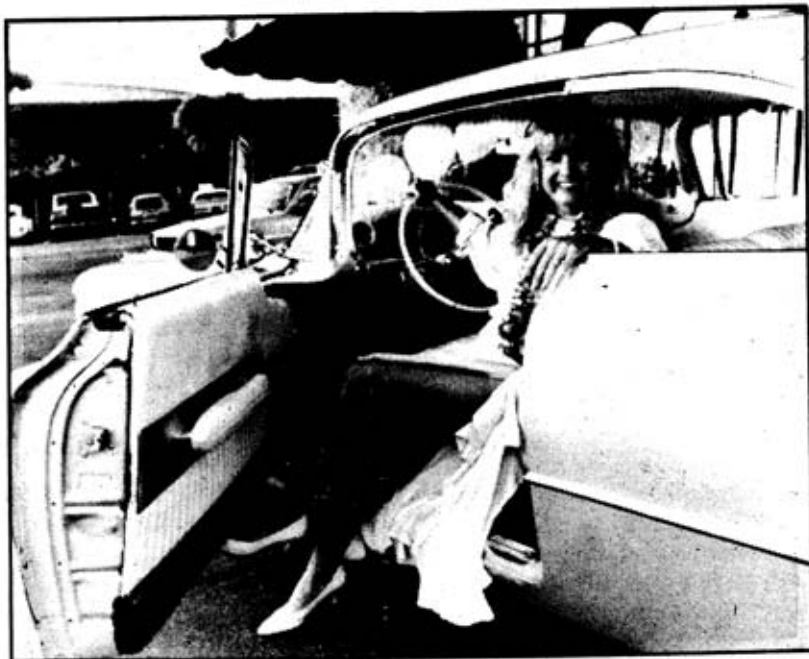
When one hires the Valettes, they arrive 15 minutes ahead of the scheduled party time, attired in their \$76 outfits of pink blouses, grey pants and pink and grey double-breasted jackets. It costs \$15 an hour per attendant with a four hour minimum. Parties can range from two-girl parties to 35-girl parties as in the case of the A&M Records party. Sullivan figures most parties last four to six hours and for every 100 people says there should be four attendants.

If a shuttle bus is required to take people from the parking area to the party, The Valettes also provide shuttling — at a charge. At present the parking service uses cars and a passenger van for shuttling, but Sullivan has bigger ideas for her shuttling service, "I have this fetish that I want a pink Cadillac more like a '53 or '55 for the company. That way people will associate the Valettes with the pink Cadillac... a convertible, of course — what a gimmick," said Sullivan.

Finding areas to park cars is not always easy. Imagine for instance Sullivan's headache trying to park cars for a party on the Manhattan Beach Strand.

"Sometimes the girls are parking cars blocks and blocks away and are jogging to and fro to get to them — on top of shuttling the guests," said Sullivan.

Getting insurance for the company was difficult in the beginning due to the girls' ages and the fact that many insurance companies had dropped valet companies due to poor records. Sullivan, Batt and Taylor, however, found evidence that indicated women in their mid-twenties were better drivers than men by 70%, said Sullivan. Armed with this study, the triumvirate did more negotiating with insurance companies and were finally able to get coverage.



Maureen Sullivan's entry into the masculine world of valet parking was inspired by simple economics. As friend and former partner Sandi Batt pointed out, valets (or valettes) make better tips than waitresses. Photo by Dwight Ueda.

So far this year, many a Valette has had a fender bender, a fact that Sullivan is proud of. "I've got a really exceptional group of girls this year and it helps support the information that women are better drivers," said Sullivan. In the ten years of her experience, accidents have been few and mostly limited to "\$300 to \$400 stuff, like scratches."

Being an all-women service did not hamper the Valettes in getting started although Sullivan recalls, "I find sometimes on the phone, not so much now as when we first started, being a woman puts people off."

It isn't just men who shy away from dealing with the company because it is run by women according to Sullivan. "I remember when we first tried to get our first loan. You know that women's bank that was supposed to give money to women? . . . Wrong, they wouldn't even give me the time of day."

"Sometimes I run into that female-male thing, but I don't have it . . . The only thing with us is the gimmick of having women. And I do hire men for other reasons," said Sullivan batting her eyelashes. "I had a male secretary for two years."

Although much of her business is in Beverly Hills, Hollywood and West Los Angeles, Sullivan has always operated out of the

South Bay and has no plans to move. The Beverly Hills number on her business cards rings at her Redondo Beach home and the entire operation is run out of the three-bedroom house she shares with two roommates.

In a business dominated by men, Sullivan and her girls have had to establish a reputation for taking care of the cars they park and of being responsible at the parties they work. "We've never lost a car or anything like that," said Sullivan, "We've had things like the keyboard with all the codes where the cars are parked blow over and all the keys have gotten mixed up so we had no idea where cars were, so it took a little longer to get them. Now the keyboards are just perfect. They open up and are really hard to blow over or the girl would really have to knock it hard."

Although the business of operating the Valettes is with Sullivan 24-hours a day because she runs the company out of her home, she claims to thrive on the activity. "It's my baby. I love the work, and I love doing every part of the business," said Sullivan.

And where does she get the energy? Sullivan credits being a vegetarian for 17 years and living in the South Bay. "I mean if you eat right and live here where there's no smog, how could you not have energy? It's the perfect place."