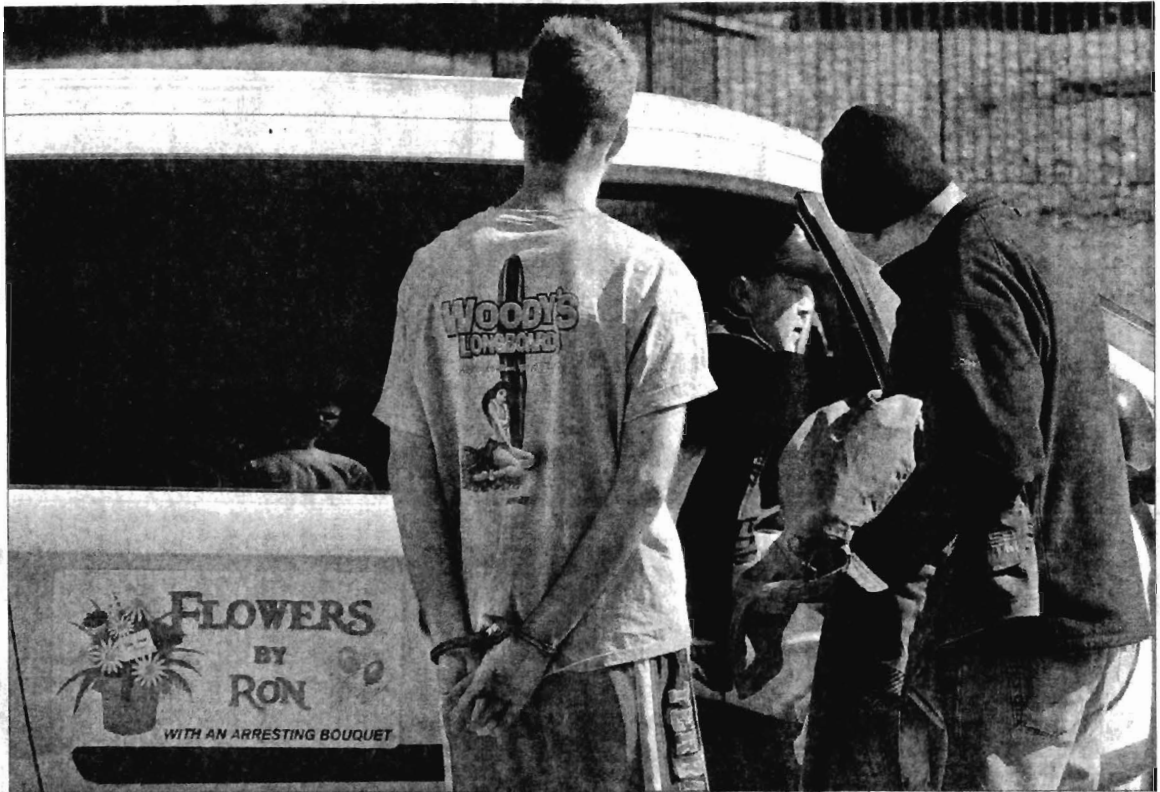


Sting of romance



By Joshua McKeerrow — The Capital

A young man arrested for an outstanding warrant yesterday gets a closer look at the sign on a phony delivery van that arrived outside his Glen Burnie apartment about noon. County Sheriff's Department deputies dressed as florists arrived at the homes of men and women wanted on outstanding warrants on Valentine's Day and told them they had a gift from an unknown admirer. When the people signed their names to receive their flowers or basket, they were told this was a sting and they were under arrest.

Deputies use Valentine's Day ploy to round up scofflaws

By HEATHER RAWLYK
Staff Writer

They thought they were getting a heartfelt gift from an unknown admirer, but instead more than a dozen men and women were served with outstanding warrants on Valentine's Day from county Sheriff's Department deputies disguised as florists.

On Wednesday, Sgt. Tonya Pfaltzgraff of the county Sheriff's Department called about 50 men and women wanted on various charges under the guise of "Maria," a representative from the fictitious company "Flowers By Ron." Sgt. Pfaltzgraff told each person she reached that a gift was being delivered to them Valentine's Day — men

were told they were getting a basket with wine and goodies, and women were told they would receive a box of long-stemmed roses and heart-shaped balloons.

Nine of those the sergeant spoke to Wednesday confirmed times they would be home to sign for the gift the next day. Little did they know that the Ron of Flowers By Ron was actually county Sheriff Ron Bateman.

The department set up times throughout the day to make their "deliveries." In between confirmed calls, deputies planned to drop by the homes of wanted men and women in the area unannounced. They hoped the sight of balloons and flowers

outside the wanted's windows would get them to open the door. And in at least a few of the cases yesterday, it worked.

At 7 a.m., Sheriff Bateman gathered his deputies in downtown Annapolis to prepare for the sting, which was part of his plan to eliminate the more than 12,000 unserved warrants he inherited when he was elected in November 2006 — and the 10,000 more he's received since.

Sgt. Jennifer Gilbert-Duran shuffled floral-printed papers with the names of the wanted and secured them onto a clipboard. It looks like something a flower delivery

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By Joshua McKerrow — The Capital

Sgt. Jennifer Gilbert-Duran, of the county Sheriff's Department, poses as a delivery driver for the faux "Flowers By Ron" flower company yesterday morning during a Valentine's Day sting to help clear backlogged warrants. The woman at the door covered her mouth with excitement when she first saw the flowers and gift.

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woman would carry, she said.

But the department didn't just rely on a believable clipboard. Sgt. Gilbert-Duran acted as a delivery woman and ditched her uniform yesterday for jeans, a pastel blue shirt, and bright pink hooded sweat-shirt. She braided her brown locks in different sections and curled the ends. To top it off, she covered her lids with sparkling teal eye shadow. The rest of the crew didn't play dress up, but planned to stay in the background until it was time to swoop in to make arrests.

The deputies split into two groups, dubbed "Flower 1" and "Flower 2." Sgt. Gilbert-Duran drove a white work van to the homes, while Sgt. Chris Rhoades also made deliveries in a second vehicle, a dark sport utility vehicle.

Both delivery vehicles featured a large magnet on the side, with the company logo: "Flowers By Ron, With An Arresting Bouquet." The Flower 1 van also had a large Batman logo magnet on the back side, playing off the sheriff's last name.

Unmarked Crown Victoria's and sport utility vehicles lagged behind the delivery vehicles. Once near the home, the deputy vehicles split off in different directions, waiting to hear over the radios if the wanted man or woman had taken the bait. When given the word, they moved in to help with the arrest.

The stops all went about the same. The van would pull up in front of the home and Sgt. Gilbert-Duran, accompanied by Deputy Mark Snyder, would pull out either a basket or flower box, a clipboard, and helium-filled mylar balloons. One of those balloons featured Batman. Deputy Harry Neisser, a Sheriff's Department spokesman, said he visited five stores before deciding on the right Batman balloon.

The first "delivery," off Epping Forest Road in Crownsville, proved the sting may be hit-or-miss.

No one answered the door shortly after 8 a.m., although deputies could see people were inside. Once they saw a young child was in the residence, they decided to back off and go to their next target.

The crew went to Greentree Apartments in Glen Burnie about 8:40 a.m. This, too, was an unconfirmed delivery, but it was worth a shot.

Within minutes, a man came walking out of the apartment building in handcuffs. Sgt. Gilbert-Duran walked about 10-feet ahead and put the gift basket and balloons back into the van. The man also got into a van, but this one was headed to the county commissioner's office.

It was the first warrant served by Flower 1. But Flower 2 had the upper hand. They had already served two, and were gloating about it over the radio. The competition between delivery trucks was on.

By 10 a.m., the deputies had a combined five warrants served. They had six by 11:10 a.m. and seven 21 minutes later. By the end of the day, they had doubled that number to 14 arrests.

"Sometimes you can't get six (warrants served) in a week," Deputy Neisser said.

The sting showed how difficult it can be to serve warrants in Anne Arundel, Sheriff Bateman said. Throughout the day, the teams knocked on dozens of doors and often, no one would answer — even for confirmed deliveries.

"The one good thing is that these people are expecting somebody at their door," Deputy Neisser said. "...But they could still be suspicious."

One woman arrested in the 300 block of Lionsheart Glen in Glen Burnie looked as though she fully believed the delivery girl standing at her door was legitimate. At the sight of the rose box and balloons, the woman covered her mouth in excitement and smiled ear to ear.

But within seconds, her smile turned into a scowl. She went inside, put on a Baltimore Ravens sweatshirt — and a pair of handcuffs. A man in a black shirt stood in the yard, saying he knew it was a set up and started making phone calls.

"He's calling people telling them what we're doing," Sheriff Bateman said from the passenger seat of a dark SUV.

This is the second warrant sting Sheriff Bateman has pulled off in the past four months. In October, more than 40 men and women were served outstanding warrants when they went to collect a check they thought they'd be receiving for "overpaying their taxes."

When they arrived at the Comptroller of the Treasure Office in Annapolis Oct. 20, they learned there was no check and were instead put in handcuffs.

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