

Flower boxes
and gift baskets
hold warrants

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Valentines not so funny to suspects

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[SUN REPORTER]

Wearing pigtails and a pink sweat shirt, Jennifer Gilbert-Duran skipped up the steps of a Pasadena home to deliver a Valentine's Day gift basket.

But as 21-year-old Richard McLeod signed for the package, he got a less romantic surprise. A sheriff's deputy placed him under arrest on a charge of failing to appear in court on an open-container violation.

"So that isn't mine?" McLeod asked as he was handcuffed.

Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman is no Cupid, but he did spend yesterday playing matchmaker: pairing a dozen crime suspects with their outstanding warrants.

After a successful stunt last fall when he lured suspects to the state Comptroller's Office with phony promises they could claim a tax refund, Bateman's deputies were in Glen Burnie and Pasadena yesterday delivering empty boxes of roses — for the ladies — and hastily assembled gift baskets — for the fellas — in a white van emblazoned with the logo "Flowers by Ron."

"There's no secret admirer, just the
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Sheriffs break suspects' hearts

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sheriff's office," Bateman said as he watched deliveries from a sport utility vehicle parked a block away.

Since Bateman took over as sheriff in 2006, he has chipped away at a daunting number of unserved warrants, slicing the number from about 12,000 to 10,000. He said 1,100 new warrants come in each month.

In October, Bateman tried to see if he could get the fugitives to come to him. With the blessing of Comptroller Peter Franchot, he sent out 500 letters telling crime suspects that \$572.26 tax refund checks were theirs to pick up — Bateman's law-enforcement version of the MTV hidden-camera show *Punk'd*.

Forty people — including some who had not paid taxes to begin with — showed up on a Saturday and left in handcuffs. Since then, the sheriff's office continues to get phone calls from people asking if it's not too late to claim their checks.

"These are people we've tried to track down, and they could've resolved this on their own," Bateman said. "This is a totally legal means to capture people."

About a week later, a sheriff in North Dakota pulled a similar hoax, inviting 500 people to a phony party at a nightclub before an Ozzy Osbourne concert at a nearby arena. More than 30 people were arrested, though Osbourne

was displeased that his show was unwillingly part of a sting.

Bateman's Valentine's Day plan was devised by a female civilian employee. On a secure phone line, crime suspects were told they had Valentine's Day deliveries and were asked for convenient delivery times.

Bateman had the "Flowers by Ron" logo made up on a giant magnet and slapped it on the side of the van. "An arresting bouquet," read the company slogan.

For good measure, he added a Batman logo on the passenger side door. During his campaign, some of his signs were defaced to remove the "e" from his name, and he has since embraced the superhero as a mascot of sorts.

The gifts were simple. If the fugitive was a woman, Gilbert-Duran, a sergeant with the sheriff's office, carried a cardboard rose box wrapped in a red bow. For guys, there was a gift basket that included an empty bottle of wine, a cigar box, a plush football and candy hearts. Both gifts were accompanied by Valentine's Day balloons and a Batman balloon.

Just being in the neighborhood paid off, officials said. One deputy took a break to go to a local fast-food restaurant and recognized a man wanted on an open warrant who was waiting in line. In another instance, a vehicle matching the description of a wanted man drove by a home that the deputies had just checked. They circled back, surrounded the house and

took the man into custody.

"One lady wanted to know if there were really flowers in the box," said Deputy Chris Reio.

Serving warrants is fraught with risks for deputies, and some targets of the sweep were suspicious of the deliveries. One man called back several times, saying he didn't have a girlfriend and checking to make sure the delivery was for him. When deputies arrived at his house, no one answered the door. But Bateman said the 12 arrests "is a huge success."

Two cars of deputies followed the van, dubbed "Flower One," as they approached houses. Gilbert-Duran would go to the door first and ask for the suspect. When the person confirmed his identity, she would hand over a clipboard for him to sign. The handoff was the tip to another deputy, Mark Snyder, to move in for the arrest.

Several people, excited about their gifts, eagerly followed through and signed their names.

One of them was McLeod, a 21-year-old Pasadena man who was issued a citation for an open container in September and failed to appear at a court hearing. He said he did not know what the warrant was for.

Bateman had left by that point, on his way to make sure an authentic Valentine's Day plan for his wife did not fall through.

"Dinner in Annapolis, and edible flowers," he said.

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