

A wheel not for the fortunate

County sheriff pursues criminals with flair, and with Pat Sajak

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The scene is familiar to millions of television viewers — Pat Sajak calling names and cracking jokes by a spinning wheel.

But yesterday, Sajak, who has hosted *Wheel of Fortune* for a quarter of a century, found himself not in a Hollywood studio but a county government building in Glen Burnie. And his assistant was not the beaming Vanna White, but someone a bit more businesslike: Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman.

Sajak, who has a home in Severna Park, and the sheriff taped an episode of *Anne Arundel County's Most Wanted*, which airs on local public access cable. While Sajak read names and descriptions of people wanted on open warrants, the sheriff spun the "Wheel of Felons."

"When we announce your name on our show it's usually good news," Sajak said. "But when we say your name here, this isn't really good news."

The sheriff, who met Sajak at a parade, is known for pursuing criminals with a certain flair. On Valentine's Day, he tricked suspects into staying home by telling them to await a delivery from "Flowers by Ron." Last year, he lured suspects with promises of phony tax refunds.

The 61-year-old game show host and the sheriff kept up the banter throughout the half-hour program, which was filmed in a small studio under a county-run parking lot.

Inspecting the wheel as the program opened, Sajak said, "I don't mean to interrupt, because you're wearing a uniform and you look like you could run me in, but it looks like we could have the beginning of a lawsuit here."

Sajak laughingly promised not to sue over trademark infringement and added that the wheel, which was divided by the names of police forces that make arrests in the county, "looks a little better than ours."

As the straight-faced sheriff tacked off the names of the suspects, Sajak called out, "I'd like to buy a vowel" and "Tell them what they've won, Ron."

Reading a description of one man, Sajak said, "Timothy and I have something in common. He, too, has a tattoo on his back, both arms and his abdomen."

Lowering his voice, he added, "I have a picture of Vanna on my abdomen. It was years ago. I was single. I got drunk."

Sajak — who does not, in fact, have any tattoos — divides his time between California and Severna Park with his wife, Lesly, and their two children. The Sajaks are major donors to Anne Arundel Medical Center, and a building there is named in their honor.

Looking more Severna Park than Los Angeles in a navy blazer and striped button-down shirt, Sajak said that he likes to give back to the county. "For my family and me, it's been a wonderful experience here," he said. Sajak, a Chicago native, said his wife is originally from Anne Arundel County.

He said that he has never had a run-in with the law in Anne Arundel County, but that a Baltimore officer gave him the only traffic ticket he has ever received after he mistakenly turned the wrong way on a one-way street.

Sajak asked the sheriff to explain several legal terms to him and clucked over the youth of many of the suspects. "Oh Bill, Bill, Bill," he chided when the sheriff mentioned one named "William."

The sheriff's department, which is responsible for serving all county warrants, has netted about 1,000 arrests from the television program since its inception a decade ago, said Deputy Harry L. Neisser, spokesman for the sheriff's office.

Usually the names of people wanted for both misdemeanors and felonies are read, but the program, taped yesterday, focused only on those suspected of felonies.

There is no shortage of opportunities to watch the program on television. It will be aired four times each weekday and six times each weekend day throughout the month of November.

At the close of the show, Bateman named Sajak a

sheriff's deputy and presented him with a plaque and a pin.

But the sheriff cautioned the game show host that it was an honorary title: "We can't have you at home in front of the mirror with your six-shooter or handcuffing people on the show."

Sajak smiled at the camera. "And don't forget," he said. "I'm out there looking for you."



Game-show host Pat Sajak (left) joins Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman for a public-access cable TV show that seeks suspects. BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO: MONICA LOPOSBAY