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ISU parking: An inside look

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AARON STEFFEN LEANED FORWARD IN HIS CHAIR. THE BILL OF HIS DUSTY GRAY HAT RESTED ON TOP OF HIS THIN-FRAMED READING GLASSES. HE THREW HIS RIGHT ARM FORWARD TOWARD THE HALF-EMPTY PURPLE AND BLACK MOUNTAIN DEW KICKSTART CAN THAT WAS SITTING ON HIS DESK.

“PEOPLE ONLY LIKE US WHEN SOMEONE PARKS IN THEIR SPOT,” STEFFEN SAYS.

HE TOOK A SIP AND GRINNED.

“Most of our complaints come from staff about reserved parking spots.”

Steffen is the parking enforcement supervisor for the Iowa State Parking Division. Born and raised in Cherokee, Iowa, Steffen graduated from Iowa State in 2007 with a bachelor’s in animal ecology with a minor in criminal justice.

“I’ve used the minor more than the major,” Steffen says. He began working for a company in Des Moines doing natural resource type work post-graduation. After a year and a half of working, Steffen realized that animal ecology wasn’t for him. He would eventually leave that position to work full time for ISU Parking.
"I just really like it here," Steffen said. "I don’t like being confined to a cubicle or a small office. I’m free to enforce [parking regulations] whenever I feel like it."

Steffen’s days typically start before 7 a.m. He’s usually tasked with assigning parking attendants to lots they would cover during their shifts. He also makes sure that the parking division’s radios are working properly, since they’re the division’s primary way of communication.

"I basically watch over enforcement officers," Steffen says. "I sometimes do ride-arounds with them as well, to see what they’re seeing out in the field."

It’s not unusual for Steffen to find himself playing mediator in heated situations between parking attendants and parking violators. Parking enforcers have even been threatened while on the job.

"One time, when I was an undergrad, we were towing a car out of a restricted parking lot," Steffen says. "The owner came outside and he was not happy about it."

Steffen said the owner habitually parked in the same restricted lot.

"He had been warned before," Steffen says. "So finally we ended up towing him out of there."

The car was already on the tow truck when the owner arrived at the scene. The owner began threatening the driver and student employee. He reached in the back seat of his car and pulled out a lead pipe. By that time, Steffen had already called the police.

"The police had to kindly ask him to leave with his lead pipe and teddy bear, which he pulled out of his back seat before leaving," Steffen says. "I don’t know why he had the teddy bear."

According to Steffen, Iowa State Boasts an Abundance of 19,949 Parking Stalls on Campus. ISU Parking Distributes 66,000 Citations Per Academic Year. About 249 Cars Have Been Towed Every Year, Most of Them From Football Games and Construction Sites. Steffen Says That Towing Is Always a Last-Resort Solution to a Problem.

Parking is a self-funded department, meaning they receive no state dollars or tuition. The money collected from fees and fines goes annual operation to cover costs such as snow removal, general lot maintenance and IT services. Any money remaining at end of year goes into a capital project account to fund major renovations or construct new parking areas.

"We do not tow because we are mad or angry at the person for parking where they shouldn’t," Steffens said. "We try not to tow if we can help it anymore. It’s a waste of time [for everyone involved]."

ISU Parking provides transportation for people who don’t have a way to pick up their towed vehicles. Steffen admitted that there have been times when he felt bad about writing a ticket or towing someone away.

"There will be a regular who keeps getting tickets, so you eventually have to move them out of the lot," Steffen says. "Somebody may just need to do a final exam or turn in a project. More times than not, someone just doesn’t want to walk a block to class."

Clark Ashland, sophomore in history and dispatcher for Iowa State Parking, has never felt remorse when having a car towed.

"It’s not like we’re jumping to tow someone," Ashland said. "We give people a lot of warnings. Don’t park illegally if you don’t want to be towed."

Ashland, an Eagan, Minnesota native, began working for the parking division in September 2015. His father went to highschool with the head of the parking division. Ashland believes there is a stigma attached to Iowa State Parking. He says that peers give him a hard time about his job all the time.

"When I tell people I work for parking they’ll be like ‘Oohh, you work for them?’ or ‘You’re one of those guys huh?’" Ashland says. "I just laugh though. It’s whatever."

Steffen agrees that the stigma exists. He offers advice to students who do not wish to find a yellow envelope tucked under their windshield wipers.

"Plan ahead, leave on time and don’t expect a certain spot to be open," Steffen says. "At the end of the day, no one likes to be fined."

Avoid Tickets (And Towing) By:

- Not parking in small reserve lots
- Not parking in something marked "all hours all days"
- Not parking outside of a stall

Smart Options

- Parking at the Iowa State Center lots for the free shuttle
- Parking in Pre-Pay and meters using the free pay-by-phone app (ParkMobile)
- Walking or riding a bike to campus

The Fine Print

- Medical Stall = $200 Fine
- Illegal Parking = $40 Fine
- Red (Reserve) Lots = $30 Fine
- Yellow (Staff) Lots = $15 Fine
- Blue (29,68,119) Lots = $15 Fine
- Dorm (Orange) Lots = $15 Fine
- Meters = $10 Fine
- Pre-Pay = $10 Fine