

## Parking attendants stay active on front lines

By Mark Kearney

When Neil Thompson was looking for a semi-retirement job about seven years ago, he wanted something simple with flexible hours. A friend recommended working as a parking lot attendant at Western.

“Little did I know just how un-simple this job would be,” Thompson says with a laugh. In his job he handled a range of parking types who visit his booth – on this particular day the one behind Social Sciences – such as pre-paid, transponders, daily fees, guest passes and special passes. When he comes in for the afternoon shift at 1:30 “it’s usually already packed to the gills here for parking. The moment you get into the booth the people are there and you never stop.”

So much for the boring life of a parking lot attendant. While it may appear to a casual observer that attendants just sit in a booth and wait for the occasional car to come by, the job is anything but.

“It’s not boring,” says Cy Murphy, who’s usually in the booth at the Medical/Dental parking lot Monday to Thursday from 7 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. “You would assume that just sitting there and taking money and giving money back would be boring. It’s a very interesting job because you meet so many people.”

Interacting with various people on campus is the key to keeping the job interesting, say the attendants. “If you didn’t like meeting people you’d have problems with this job,” says Thompson, who recalls Michael Ignatieff, Lieutenant Governor David Onley, and Pinball Clemons as some of the celebrities he’s met on the job. “You can’t be shy about it.”

Murphy, who worked with Campus Police before becoming an attendant in 2006, likes the university as a workplace. “I like the people here, I like being in the booth, talking to people. I just want to be busy.”

Though it’s a business about providing spaces for cars, both attendants also help visitors out, share information on where to find certain places on campus, and even provide emergency assistance when small accidents such as fender benders take place.

“The reason the attendant is there is typically they’re the first face the visitor will encounter at Western,” says Mark Van Den Bossche, manager of parking and visitor service at the university. “They play a central and important role in welcoming guests to campus.”

The attendants are not university employees but are contracted through parking service with Commissionaires Great Lakes, a security services firm, says Van Den Bossche. Though Commissionaires was originally set up to find jobs for returning military veterans, the 13 attendants and two supervisors come from various walks of life. Murphy worked with the RCMP and Canada Post earlier in his career while Thompson was in the farm real estate appraisal business.

Each attendant gets training from Commissionaires while Western provides customer service instruction covering such aspects as conflict resolution and dealing with people. Attendants get one week on the job in the booth with someone else there and then they're on their own.

Western has five attended lots staffed daily Monday to Friday during the academic year – Alumni Thompson, Weldon, Kent Drive, Social Sciences and Medical Science, says van den Bossche. The Talbot and Huron Flats lots are also attended to during special events.

“It’s almost like a traffic cop role that they play out there,” says Van Den Bossche. While 99 per cent of the visitors are respectful and polite, attendants have to deal with people who get cranky “because they can’t park where they want to park,” a lot is full, they don’t have the right pass or they believe parking should be free. Attendants also make judgment calls on when a lot is considered full or if a person can be let in without the right pass. “It’s not just standing in a booth taking money,” says Van Den Bossche. “There’s a lot of interaction and a lot of judgment calls on a daily basis.”

An attendant generally sits on a stool in the booth during a shift. Inside there’s a small counter, a cashbox, two-way radio, telephone, and heating and air conditioning. Rotating staff and supervisors can take over a booth when an attendant needs a bathroom break or wants to grab something to eat. “I’m almost embarrassed to tell people sometimes just how comfy I am” in the booth, says Thompson.

Some do crossword puzzles, listen to the radio or occasionally read a book during down time. But such lulls are rare during the school year. Says Thompson, “you no sooner get a sentence or two read and you go to do something at the window and then you go back and read a sentence and then back to the window.”

He and Murphy talk about how friendly most people are, how they get to know regulars at their lots, the occasional Christmas gifts they get from parking patrons, and how students and others will sometimes drop off a coffee as a way of saying thanks.

“The students are really good,” says Murphy. “They’re nice kids; they’re here to learn and to enjoy themselves.”

Of course, in a people business that comes with the frustrations that full lots and parking fees can bring, it's not always fun and games. Thompson talks about the occasional people who "lose their minds," while Murphy recalls a few belligerent drivers who get upset when they get a parking ticket at the pay and display that's just outside his booth (and for which he's not responsible).

The key to smooth operating is a sense of humour and the ability to calm people down. "Nothing fazes me out there," Murphy says.

And in an age where technology rules, Van Den Bossche wants to see the attendants being able to handle debit and credit cards within a year or so. But more automation won't necessarily mean the end of attendants.

"There should always be someone in a booth doing something. There needs to be a presence," he says. People still need to know where they're going on campus and an intercom system won't do that. "(The attendants) may not be taking cash (in the future), but they'll still be providing a customer service."