

July 2004

The Princess Of Paramus

The following may not necessarily have a lot to do with the taxi business in NYC. However, I want to tell you about a recent experience with a blood thirsty municipality in the metropolitan area that you may have occasion to go through on a fare or on your time off. I want to tell you about a judge and prosecutor who seem more interested in bleeding the people that fall into their web than showing any mercy to people who may be entitled to some.

For many years, I've traveled on Route 17 in Paramus New Jersey to go home after I'm done working in NYC. For those of you who have traveled this road you know that it is a very busy thoroughfare. Many motorists do break the speeding laws and deserve to be summonsed. But most of us do obey the traffic laws and should be left alone.

During the wee hours of the morning, there is not a lot of traffic. However, for some reason, there are more police cars patrolling this road than you would think necessary at that hour. They pull over cars basically for no reason other than to see if there is anything they can write a summons for. Sound familiar?

One early morning last July, I was on my way home when I was pulled over for no other reason than I was there. I had not broken any traffic laws. I was driving safely. However when I could not produce my insurance card. I received a summons for this not so major crime.

Now this was nothing more serious than a parking violation. It was not a moving violation and there were no points involved. I could have pled guilty and mailed it in for \$44. However, since I knew that I could prove that I was insured I decided to show up in court and ask for the summons to be dismissed. I was also concerned that the infraction might somehow find it's way on to my New York record. With the TLC always after us, that is a concern.

In court is where I met "The Princess of Paramus", as I like to think of her, the Honorable Judge Deborah L. Ustas. I sat in her court room for over four hours, while observing her giving no mercy to anyone who came before her. It was clear to me that she was not going to show any mercy for my trivial infraction.

I had to first talk to the prosecutor. I politely asked if he would be willing to dismiss the summons since I had brought proof of insurance. Not only was he not willing to dismiss, he said that since I came to court I would have to pay an additional \$30. court fee. It is an interesting system of justice that requires you to pay to get your constitutional right to a hearing.

I next went before Princess, uh, Judge Ustas. I again asked her if she would be willing to dismiss this summons. She, on her high horse, said that I was not being charged with not having insurance but I was being charged with not producing my insurance card. She gave me no choice. Either I pled guilty and paid the fine or I would be obligated to request a trial and come back another day. To have a trial over this and another long trip from my home seemed ludicrous, so I

agreed to plead guilty.

I then asked if she would waive the \$30 court cost, since I could have mailed in the summons to begin with. She said I spoke to the prosecutor and she could not waive the cost. I knew before I asked she wouldn't, because it was obvious to me that this court was a money sucking establishment whose primary purpose was to legally mug people whether they could afford it or not. I witnessed people who asked for mercy because they did not have the money to pay the exorbitant fines she was handing out. Princess Ustas demanded they go to the cash machine across the street or find some way to come up with money they plain and simply did not have. She did not care how they got it. Either pay now or face harsher consequences.

So I plead guilty and that is when the trouble really started. Princess, uh, Judge Ustas asked if I was pleading on my own free will. This is a matter of procedure. So, I told her that I was pleading guilty, but only because she didn't have the good will and courtesy of dismissing the charge. This almost got me arrested for contempt. She refused to accept my guilty plea and ordered a trial.

I next asked for her to forgive my statement. I did not want a trial. She refused and ordered me to leave the court. I didn't leave. I started to talk to lawyers to see if I could get out of this. Under no circumstances did I ever want to go back to this court to see her again. Despite that, there was a police officer telling me to leave. He had been mentally sucking up to her good looks throughout the session. I still didn't leave. I waited till her last case was done, then appeared before her and asked her to please accept my apology and my guilty plea. She was tired, she agreed. I paid.

Let me say this: I am done going through Paramus. I have another option. I can take the Palisades Parkway to get home. I have been doing so ever since. I have not seen one police car during the wee hours. This is not to say that there are not police hiding and looking for speeders. This I don't mind. But there are not more police than are necessary to do the job. The only reason I liked going through Paramus at that time was because of all the services that are available on the road. Dunkin Donuts, McDonalds, gas stations etc. So now Princess Ustas can explain to all these businesses why they are losing customers. Bye Bye Paramus. Who needs you?