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In tony Tuxedo Park, it's no invitation, no admittance. And Kathleen Spalthoff has, for years, been the sentinel of the rich and the private.

The gatekeeper

By PAULINE GREENBERG
Staff Writer

Kathleen Spalthoff has followed the same routine five days a week for 20 years: She puts on her blue dispatcher's uniform and travels from her Greenwood Lake home to her office in a stoic stone structure.

To the officers in the tony village of Tuxedo Park, she's "Mother Spalthoff," a well-earned nurturing nickname. But she doesn't hesitate to scold them if her morning coffee isn't ready when she starts her 8 a.m. shift.

She's the dispatcher for the police department.

Perhaps more important, she's the gatekeeper to the stone village entranceway. Until next month, when she will retire from her sentinel post.

She controls the mechanical arm that either rises to beckon you in or stubbornly blocks the roadway, keeping you on the outside.

For the many who never see the gate rise to meet them, it's a mysterious palatial place where the rich and private seek solace. Inside this village that reveres its privacy as much as its autonomy, Spalthoff is a most beloved employee.

She knows if you are home today; she knows if you're away. She knows who you expect each day and who to keep at bay.

When Peter Simonetta moved to Tuxedo Park, he had already known Spalthoff for years.

"She stopped me at the gate even though she knew me for 10 years," he said. "She's very protective of all the residents. She deals with over 320 families and about 1,500 different personalities."

Yet, he added, she treats everyone with the same respect.

"And she's tough as nails," he said.

Just ask Howard Stern or the Eye Witness News Team. The highly recognizable TV faces had no luck getting past Spalthoff, according to former Mayor Cornelius Madera.

The news team pulled up to her gate expecting admittance because they were the network, Madera remembered. They wanted to report from the park on the anniversary of the Tuxedo jacket. But Spalthoff stood her ground: no invitation, no admittance. The broadcast proceeded from outside the gates. Howard Stern had better luck getting in, but not because of Spalthoff.

He and his entourage came to film an episode of "House Party," where he unexpectedly shows up at someone's house and films his show. Stern had never run across Tuxedo Park's gatekeeper. No invitation, no show, no way. But, Madera intervened and negotiated a deal with Stern not to disclose that he was filming from the park.

CHRIS RAMIREZ/The Record

Kathleen Spalthoff, called "the best of the best," is retiring next month from her post in Tuxedo Park.

"Kathleen wouldn't let him in. I softened," Madera said.

Standing by the gate she guards so effectively, it's easy to see the other side, the side with the uncanny memory and sight.

Spalthoff, with her perfectly curled soft white hair and eyes that sparkle with youthful humor, can have the gate raised and wave you on with her reassuring smile before you've completed the turn off the highway.

"She remembers my mother and mother-in-law," Madera said. "And they visit very rarely."

Simonetta is indebted to Spalthoff, whom he calls a wonderful woman and is grateful for her empathy. He recently lost his partner, and during the illness they received a lot of outside help from friends and Hospice.

"She made our life a lot easier," he said. "There isn't enough good I can say about her."

Police Chief Bill Bortnowsky agrees.

Spalthoff is a professional, he said. She's become an irreplaceable piece of the department and village. The vast amount of knowledge she has, about residents and village rules, can't be taught to someone else.

The chief didn't disclose her habit of setting the gate down on top of cars, especially his. That secret was divulged by someone else - a dispatcher colleague.

"She was kind of dangerous," laughed friend and fellow dispatcher Mary Lou Gullage of the Tuxedo Police Department.

Spalthoff is also one of the only dispatchers who doesn't fall for the chief's security checks. He borrows a car unfamiliar to them, slips a cap down shielding his eyes and tries to get through the gate.

Spalthoff catches him every time.

"I just want to wish her well," Gullage said. "It's been a pleasure knowing her."

It sure has, said Howard Shore, Tuxedo Park resident and Hollywood movie score producer.

"We will miss her smile," he said.

Spalthoff is retiring early next month, Bortnowsky said. She and her husband are heading south.

Just ask and she'll proudly show the 3- by 5-inch print of the house waiting for her on the warm Southeast coast.

It's time, she said. Four kids and 20 years in the booth are enough. She is ready to relax.

"She could probably write a 10-volume book on the goings on inside the Park," Madera said.

"She looks like a nice normal motherly type but God forbid you're not expected," he added. "Kathleen is the best of the best."

Budgets
No shocks expected for taxpayers
— pages 4 & 5

News
Public invited to armchair adventures
— page 9

Opinion
Town curfew is viewed as positive
— page 12

Sports
Hudson Valley Kings reaching out to youths
— page 24