

## Shriners Tucked Into Tiny Cars A Dashing Sight at Annual Parade

Allure of the Lark Is No Big Secret

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Among the enduring perplexities surrounding the Freemasons and Shriners -- the fezzes, the secret handshakes, why local honchos are called potentates -- lies an even deeper mystery that confounds many Washingtonians, particularly those who attend the annual George Washington Birthday Parade in Old Town Alexandria.

Who exactly are these grown men, members of the ancient society, who squeeze into tiny cars and zoom through the crowd-lined streets doing figure eights?

Yesterday, amid the clip-clopping of Clydesdales and drumbeats of student marching bands, a half-dozen Shriners from Northern Virginia rumbled their way through the streets of Alexandria in their miniaturized Corvettes, entertaining hundreds of parade watchers on a sunny, cold Presidents' Day.

For many people, the popular George Washington Birthday Parade would not be the same if it were not for these men rushing wildly around in cars that they barely fit into. Kids go crazy when they pass by. Adults stare in a mix of wonder and genuine medical concern. For the Shriners, driving the cars is nothing short of an honor passed down from previous members of a brotherhood. In fact, one of the main reasons the Shriners participate in the parade is that George Washington was a Freemason based in Fredericksburg.



Snug inside a miniaturized Corvette, Shiner Ken Hall takes a spin in Alexandria during the annual George Washington Birthday Parade. The cars were first made in the early 1970s as a GMC promotion for the Stingray Corvette. (Photos By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post)

"The guys before us took care of them," said Earl Jones, a former Marine, rubbing down his car with cleaning fluid before the beginning of the parade. "It's been passed to me to take care of it. It's a privilege."

These freewheeling Shriners are members of Kena Shrine Temple in Fairfax County, a philanthropic organization that raises thousands of dollars every year to help child burn victims as well as those with orthopedic problems. To become a Shiner, one must first be invited to be a member of the Freemasonry, billed as the oldest fraternal order in the world.

Within Kena Shrine, members choose from various "units," including the Camel Herders, the Hillbillies and the Highlanders. One of the most popular is the Kena 500 -- the guys who drive the small cars in parades.

The Kena 500 is a close-knit confederacy, among them a few retired Marines, a special education teacher and a retired Lorton corrections officer. Many of them say the most pressing challenge is recruiting members in their twenties and thirties. They fear the younger generation might be intimidated by stereotypes or falsehoods about Freemasons, popularized in part by the bestselling novel "The Da Vinci Code."

"People have this misconception that this is a religion. It's not a religion," Jones said.

The Shriners bond over cigarettes, discuss the eccentricities of their car maintenance and tell stories about the military. They tease or play pranks on each other, snickering at 242-pound former Marine Mac McAfee as he gets into -- and then removes himself -- from his miniature car.

"Were you in Korea?" Jones asked Don Ritenour, 70, also a former Marine, while the group was waiting on Wilkes Street for the parade to begin.

"No, I was not," Ritenour said.

"So you're not that old," Jones shot back.

"He enrolled when he was 12," McAfee chimed in.

To the Shriners, participation in the Kena 500 is hardly illogical. Messing around with souped-up, five-horsepower go-karts is a not-so-subtle display of childhood reclamation. Jeff St. Onge, senior weapons analyst for a defense contractor and retired Air Force master sergeant, summed it up succinctly:

"What's the best part about this? Going fast!" he yelled.

The Shriners got the mini-Corvettes in the early 1970s when GMC manufactured them to promote the Stingray Corvette, according to Shriner officials. Kena Shrine Temple purchased them and began using them in parades and national Shriner competitions to bring attention to their charitable works. Kena 500 members pay about \$1,500 to lease about 20 cars, which can go up to 35 mph.

As yesterday's parade began, newcomers who had never seen the men before were stopped in their tracks. "Surreal," said Barbara Askjean, 31, of Alexandria. "It transcends time."

Maureen Rehg, a longtime Alexandria resident, loves watching the Shriners speed up and down her city's normally quiet streets.

"How tall do you think No. 8 is? And do you think his back hurts?" she asked, looking at Kenneth Hall, the man who choreographs the Kena 500 unit's parade routines.

Down the street, there was Carl Questad, 5, yelling very loudly, under the false impression that the Kena 500 was a speed race. "Go, 29! Go, 29!"

"You like 29?" his mother, Rebecca, asked.

Carl paused before he answered. He wanted to give a measured response. "I like 30 more," he said.

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