



EXTRA

By **Kim Fernandez**

If you've ever had your car valet parked in Spartanburg, S.C., and thought the guy behind the wheel—the one with the big smile and friendly greeting who hustled a little bit more than usual to get you where you were going—looked vaguely familiar, you probably saw him on TV last winter wearing a different kind of uniform. That's because your valet was Landon Cohen, who made headlines playing defensive tackle for the Seattle Seahawks in the 2015 Super Bowl.

"I'm almost an expert," laughs Cohen, who started valet parking cars with some high school buddies at parties and private events in 2001 and founded The Valet, LLC, in 2012. "At 20 years, you become an expert."

Cohen says he loves everything about the parking industry, from the chance to meet customers to the opportunity to get a little exercise on the job to driving some pretty sweet rides, even for short distances, but that the best part is mentoring teens and young men who come to work for him. And even though he's realized his childhood dream of playing in the NFL, his real passion, believe it or not, is parking cars.

"I'm in the people business," he says. "The car is very important to me, but I want my employees and my customers to understand that this is really about genuine human contact."

The Story

Cohen spent his whole life in Spartanburg—his mom is a school guidance counselor there—and always wanted to play football. He played the sport and ran track and field at Spartanburg High before heading to Ohio University, where he earned second team All-Mid-Conference Honors his sophomore year and started every game his junior and senior years.

He was drafted by the Detroit Lions in 2008, where he played six games his rookie year and 14 games his second year. Since then, he's been a proud member of the Jacksonville Jaguars, New England Patriots, Dallas Cowboys, Chicago Bears, Buffalo Bills, and the Seahawks, for whom he played in his first Super Bowl last February. Through all that, his off-season was spent parking cars.

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POINTS

“Nobody taught us how to do it,” he says of the group of friends who first came up with the idea of valet parking in high school. “We were a bunch of kids. We got together and decided to wear khaki pants, white shirts, and neckties and go valet park some cars.” They put themselves out for private parties and events and found business came to them almost immediately. Along the way, Cohen figured out his charismatic personality and big grin went a long way toward making customers happy.

“It was all about service, and I was loving it,” he says. “I’ve always been compelled for whatever reason to come out of my shell with people, and I really enjoyed the work.”

Business grew, and in 2012, Cohen formally launched The Valet, LLC., working with the city to set up shop on what he calls an “eat what you kill basis” and offering valet parking services to downtown businesses along with private events. It was like nothing Spartanburg had ever seen.

“Getting started, especially in a town like ours, is a huge learning curve,” he says. “Things had been done the same way for a long time, and it was tough to get started. People didn’t understand something new and that this could help them. We had to explain that we could alleviate any parking concerns they had and that would alleviate other levels of stress for everyone. Once they understood that, it took off.”

“We set up shop in downtown Spartanburg and started passing out cards. We went to every business there was,” he says. “I have two great mentors at home, and every meeting I wanted to get, I was able to arrange thanks to them. I learned a lot about people, transportation, customer service, and how to do business from them.”

Today, The Valet works five or six events a week and employs 14 workers, many of whom started with Cohen as teens and have worked their way up to management positions. Cohen works hard to mentor his employees and says the payback has been tremendous on several levels.

Mentoring

“Mentoring these guys is one of the biggest things we do,” he says. “I’m a lead-by-example kind of guy, so at



events, I’ll start parking cars myself and show them how it’s done. A lot of these guys are 18 or 19 years old. I ask them to speak with everyone who comes down the street and get them to come out of their shells. I search for that personality with everyone who works for me.”

While Cohen says many of his employees apply because they love cars, they have to be totally committed to customer service as well, and that goes beyond keeping vehicles safe. “This is all about individual care,” he says. “I don’t care if you have a 1978 Camaro or a 2014 Bentley, you’re going to be treated exactly the same. My guys are looking to serve their community and serve other people, and we all get enjoyment out of that.”

One of the conditions of employment is that if an employee leaves The Valet, he or she has to bring in a suitable replacement. Cohen says while it sounds unorthodox, it’s one of the things that cements his bond with his employees, and they’re very careful about who they recommend for hire.

“It’s worked very well,” he says. “People are very invested in being part of our team.”

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Run Fast, Drive Slow

Run fast, drive slow is The Valet's motto, and it's one Cohen developed with purpose—the same way he approaches everything else in his business and his life.

"I get in shape with this job," he says. "The first two years, I'd run this hill where we parked the cars. It was a great hill, and I'd sprint it, maybe about 20 times a day. It was like old-school Herschel Walker training. People would see me doing squats in my down-time and doing push-ups to stay in shape, and it was really cool to be both parking cars and working out—finding time to do both that way."

His customers also got a kick out of watching him bolt up the hill for their cars and then carefully and slowly park them, and a slogan—and a way of doing business—was born.

"You're taking off to help them and then driving slow," he says. "There's definitely a strategy to it. You take the person's keys and take off running, and that's part of the show. They get you, they get a show. That's also the service, and it means they're getting their car back in a timely manner and you're going to make up time running fast. Then you catch your breath, get in the car, adjust the temperature based on their instructions and to make them comfortable, and you return the car and handle yourself with poise. So you pull up slow, because there's nothing worse than a valet squealing tires like Ferris Bueller all over again."

He also teaches his valets to chat up customers in an appropriate way. "I tell my guys they build up their karmic points every time they're out here," he says. "Every time you serve and do it with love and go the extra mile, you're building it up. It's a double whammy for life."

The lessons come honestly. "I love the human contact I get every time I open up a car door," he says. "I see a couple arguing like crazy before I open up that door, and it's my chance to see if I can make things better for a second. I get extreme enjoyment from interacting from people on a genuine level."

The Player and the Game

Currently a free agent, Cohen says he brings his football mentality to parking cars and vice versa and that being a valet actually has a lot in common with being in the NFL.

"This is about relationships, and it's about being a teammate," he says. "I've been a journeyman—six teams in eight years. I have to learn how to be part of a different team very quickly, and that's something I try to teach these guys here. You're parking with three guys you've never worked with. This is not about hazing. You bring on the new guy and you help him and ultimately, at the end of the day, you're making a living with him. Our guys split the tips, so the better the new guy does, the better you do, and it's all about helping and making the operation run smoothly."

He also tries to teach them lessons he's learned and pass on his commitment to service and to finding the purpose in any job.

"When you give somebody a genuine smile, they can't help but give you one back," he says. "If you give a tight-lipped, Kermit the Frog smile, that's what you're going to get back there, too. If you happy to see someone, they're happy to see you or they'll fake it because they appreciate your energy."

It's an energy he passes on to his workers. "This has been a really, really cool thing," he says of his parking experience. "I enjoy it. You know, you can enjoy anything if you look for the higher purpose. It has nothing to do with the money I make and everything to do with serving people. How many people can I employ? If I have 100 employees, I'm helping 100 people pay their bills and teaching them the philosophies of loving and serving that we've based this business on. That 100 people can multiply that energy to the next 10,000 people we serve. It keeps going."

"We have that team chemistry," he says of his employees. "They have to be physically in shape to do that job, and being with them is kind of like being a football coach. We need the best chemistry for it to work. I want to be out there with them, and they like the guys they work with and will go to bat for them."

And that's why there's a sentence he's repeated to everyone from his employers to his customers to ESPN: "I think," he says, "valet parking is the best job in the world. I love being in the parking industry."

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