

What's in a name? Social insecurity

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AROUND ALASKA

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HAINES -- I'm not sure what my name is. I didn't get hit on the head and lose my memory. I tried to renew my driver's license and was informed that the name I have been using for 25 years is not legal.

Apparently, I didn't change it from the name I was born with, Heather Vuillet, after I married Chip Lende. I thought I had, since Heather Lende is printed on my passport, license, income tax forms, property deeds, insurance policies and the nameplate in front of my chair at Haines Borough School Board meetings.

Not so, said the Social Security computer, which cross-checked my license renewal application at the office of the Alaska Department of Motor Vehicles here and blocked it.

Alarmed, I called the Social Security Administration and spoke with a woman, who, I believe, was in Oklahoma. She said I needed to bring my passport and marriage certificate to the nearest Social Security office, which is in Juneau, 90 miles by ferry or plane.

At the Federal Building door in Juneau, I took off my boots, walked through a metal detector and was wanded by a guard in a police-style uniform. He also asked to see my ID.

The driver's license still worked.

At the door of the Social Security office, there was another armed guard, in a brown, military-style uniform. It was just us in the windowless waiting room. After 15 minutes, a Social Security officer called me to the counter.

I cheerfully explained the situation and showed him my passport and marriage license. I also had my driver's license, voter registration card, birth certificate, baptismal record and all five of our children's birth certificates, just in case. He looked at them and at his computer screen and said he was sorry but I wasn't legally Heather Lende.

He said that my license would not be renewed and the same thing would happen when my passport expired if I didn't match my name to my Social Security number. I wished I had the presence of mind to ask why my income tax was still being collected.

Instead, I started to say that without ID I couldn't leave Haines by plane, ferry or road through Canada. (This is also true of all Alaskans.) But we don't have a hospital. What if I was sick or injured? What if my dad in New York got sick and I couldn't go? I must have looked like I was going to cry, because the officer said he would help me.

All I had to do was to fill out a name-change form and provide two pieces of ID, a passport or driver's license in my maiden name, and a marriage certificate -- the original or a certified copy -- from the agency that issued it.

But my passport and license already had the name that would be my new name, Heather Lende, on them.

I did have my birth certificate and my marriage license. I asked if they could be the two IDs. He said birth certificates aren't allowed.

I heard the "Twilight Zone" music and then saw Laurel trying to explain this one to Hardy in their screwball comedy way:

"Let me get this straight" Laurel would say " I need an ID with a name on it that I don't have and can't get in order to change it to the name that I already have that is on all of my IDs?"

The Social Security officer agreed it was nutty, but it was the law. He could, however, use the marriage license as one of the two required documents, and a certified copy of a medical record in my maiden name could substitute for the license or passport as the other.

I am 47 years old. I was married in New York when I was 22 and have been in Alaska ever since. I was a healthy child. I got stitches once, when I was 10, visiting the Pennsylvania grandparents.

My parents left the town I grew up in 15 years ago to move to a farm upstate. My mother didn't save much in the transition except my Middlebury College diploma.

That is not a legal ID. But the record of a minor knee surgery I had in a Vermont hospital when I was in school there would be if I could find it.

It was easy. I did it by phone and fax with a credit card -- same with the agency-certified copy of my marriage license.

Once I had the documents in hand, the Social Security officer in Juneau -- who has been very kind -- called to say I might not need the medical record after all. Since I had it, I mailed it to him anyway, and in a few weeks I should have my old name back.

In the meantime, I think the lesson in all of this is best summed up by a faded bumper sticker on 80-something-year-old Haines pioneer John Schnabel's truck: "I Love My Country But Fear My Government."

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