



(+) (-) change font size print article email article RSS RSS feed All RSS feeds

Wednesday, April 23, 2008

# In the driver's seat

## Business's growth found in small spaces

### MODERN LIVING

By Pamela H. Sacks TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
psacks@telegram.com

Danielle R. Spring likes nothing better than looking at an empty parking lot and calculating how many vehicles it could hold.

Parking is her thing and nowadays, Ms. Spring is in parking heaven.

She and Jonathan Koop, her business partner, own and operate S&K Valet. On any given night, men and women clad in dark green S&K Valet jackets stand ready to park cars in front of many of Worcester's finer restaurants, nightclubs



Danielle Spring of Worcester, co-owner with Jonathan Koop of S&K Valet, stands near her apartment with her car. (T&G Staff / TOM RETTIG)

[Enlarge photo](#)



Danielle Spring of Worcester, co-owner with Jonathan Koop of S&K Valet, stands near her apartment with her car. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

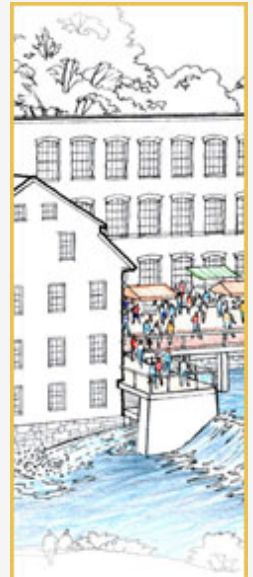
[Enlarge photo](#)



[Enlarge photo](#)

and bars.

**BREAKING NEWS ALERTS**  
The latest news, emailed to you, as it happens. [Sign up now](#)



WHITIN  
MILL  
CAPITAL  
CAMPAIGN

ONLINE  
DONATIONS



WorcesterWorks.com  
**TOP Jobs**

Three years ago, Ms. Spring and Mr. Koop could be found parking cars for customers of the Pearl Oyster Restaurant on Shrewsbury Street.

The restaurant has since closed, and Mezcal Tequila Cantina has taken its place. S&K Valet is still on the job. But now, Ms. Spring and Mr. Koop don't park the cars themselves. They have 30 accounts and 117 people on their payroll. They lease 10 private parking lots around the city.

"It's really cool to look back on it," Ms. Spring, 27, said of S&K's origins. The interview took place in the morning, and she had just rolled out of bed, having been up until 4 a.m. driving her gold Lexus SUV from one client to another to make sure things were running smoothly. She and Mr. Koop, 25, trade off the nighttime duty.

It can get pretty hectic, particularly on a Friday or Saturday night.

"We'll have cars lined up down the street waiting to valet," said Lucas Heipt, who has worked for S&K more than a year. "Jon and Danielle will call several people over to get all the cars moved and parked and everything done right. They will come personally and help us. They do that a lot."

Ms. Spring and Mr. Koop have found that their biggest problem is the occasional drunken patron.

"They come out and think we're their best friends," Ms. Spring said, elaborating on the situation her employees must handle. "They ask for their keys. We say 'no' and give the keys to the restaurant."

Ms. Spring has a firm but pleasing manner. She always offers to pay the patron's cab fare home.

"I'd rather pay for the cab than have somebody get killed," she said.

Restaurant owners say the valet service is beneficial in several ways.

Kevin Ludy, co-owner of the Niche Hospitality group, which operates Mezcal, Bocado Tapas Wine Bar on Winter Street and Block Five on Green Street, all in Worcester, said hiring S&K made sense because of the service the company provides and the image valet parking conveys to restaurant patrons.

"It works out very nicely," Mr. Ludy said. "We think it provides a service that is fitting with our restaurants."

Mr. Ludy added that both Mr. Koop and Ms. Spring are easy to work with and good problem solvers.

"They're polite, and they know how long the wait is or they find out," he said. "They're in the trenches, and they've trained their people well."

Robb and Madeleine Ahlquist hired S&K for their three Worcester restaurants, The Sole Proprietor on Highland Street and Via and the One Eleven Chop House, both on Shrewsbury Street. Mr. Ahlquist said it has been a challenge for S&K to figure out how much to charge for their services and still make money. Valet parking must be top quality because customers view the restaurant and the valet service as one in the same, he said.

Mr. Ahlquist said that they hired S&K because Ms. Spring attended Bancroft School with one of his daughters.

**TAXI CAB** Drivers wanted. FT / PT shifts avail. Busiest cab co. in city, ...

**EXCLUSIVE PRIVATE Country Club** Seeks a retail professional for its golf ...

**CONSTRUCTION TESTING ENGINEERING** TECHNICIAN IMTL Construction Services ...

**DRIVER-LABORER** Non CDL. Exp. with crew truck and landscape trailer to ...

**EMT** Start your medical Career.. in 4 months you could be treating people ...

**MAINTENANCE WORKER WANTED** Trustworthy, hardworking, with own ...

**PRIVATELY OWNED** Central Mass. Country Club seeking high energy ...

**MECHANIC NEEDED** for Mobile repair of John Deere tractors. Experience ...

**Nurses:** Per Diems shifts available! 1 yr experience required. . Contact: ...

**PACKAGE HANDLERS** NOW HIRING Snelling Staffing. We are looking packers ...

**More great jobs at WorcesterWorks.com**

**Employers Advertise Here**

"They've had a learning curve," he said. "Cars can get backed up on Highland Street, and that's not acceptable. They've gotten very mobile, and they can move the cars around pretty quickly."

Ms. Spring was born and raised in Worcester. She graduated from Bancroft and then from Denison University in Ohio. She went on to law school at The Ohio State University, but quickly discovered the field was not for her. She later became a teacher for the Correctional Recovery Academy in the Massachusetts state prison system. "I did that for six months," Ms. Spring said. "I thought, 'I need to find something I really want to do.'"

She went to work for Laz Parking Limited of Hartford at St. Vincent Hospital. Shortly afterward, Mr. Koop was hired as her supervisor. He had just earned his degree from Northeastern University. Originally from Dallas, he had worked in valet service since he was 16.

"It's all I can ever remember doing to earn a couple of bucks," Mr. Koop said.

At first, Ms. Spring resented Mr. Koop.

"The parking business is a boys' club," she said. "I'd give him a hard time. But he's such a good guy you can only keep it up for a week."

Ms. Spring and Mr. Koop both like sports. Ms. Spring recalled that they came up with the idea for S&K Valet in the fall of 2005 while watching a basketball game on TV. They formed a partnership and later converted S&K to a female-owned company with minority status. Ms. Spring is African-American and American Indian. She is a member of the Pocasset Wampanoag tribe of Rhode Island.

The newly minted entrepreneurs set a goal of landing three accounts during their first year in business. They acquired 12. They attribute some of their success to good timing — the restaurant and entertainment scenes were taking off — and the balance of hard work and a persuasive sales pitch. They emphasize the efficiency of their service and stress that hiring a Worcester company will boost the local economy.

The company has yet to turn a profit, Ms. Spring said. She and Mr. Koop project that if S&K continues to expand, they will be in the black within two years. They compete with Valet Park of America, a Springfield company, as well as Laz, the company that serves St. Vincent. Ms. Spring speaks with pride of the ethnic diversity of her employees. Many are young male college students — but not all of them. "We have a lady and a gentleman in their 50s," Ms. Spring said. "They're out there running. I love it. They're awesome."

Each day, S&K employees can be assigned to any one of the company's clients. They call in to Ms. Spring to say they are available; they earn \$10 an hour and pool their tips.

Matt Ward learned about S&K through a friend. He was already busy with his own business, fixing up Mazda Miatas and reselling them, as well as working for his father at Classic Motor Car Storage, Sales & Restorations. Another job? Why not.

"I can't stand just staying home doing nothing when you can make money," Mr. Ward, 20, said, adding that he parks cars just about every night. "If I'm not at a restaurant, I'm at the Crowne Plaza," the company's biggest account, he said.

"There are guys who will give you a \$100 bill and ask you to get a pack of cigarettes and give you a \$20 tip," Mr. Ward said.

Mr. Heipt, 22, who is studying criminal justice at Becker College, started working for S&K to pay for his books.

"I just stuck with it," he said. "You meet a lot of people and make a lot of connections."

Both men have good things to say about their bosses. Mr. Ward recalled the time he and his co-workers were standing in the pouring rain at the One Eleven Chop House. Mr. Koop showed up in his Jeep and opened the tailgate to give them some protection from the elements.

In the view of Ms. Spring, S&K is like a family. Mr. Heipt agrees.

"She's a great boss, he said. "She's cooperative, motivated and highly intelligent. I like working for her a lot."



**Click here**  
*to subscribe to the  
Telegram & Gazette*

» [Add your comments to this article..](#)



[News](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [RSS](#) | [Personals](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Weather](#) | [Company Store](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Submissions Policy](#) | [Contact us](#)

© 2008 Worcester Telegram & Gazette Corp.

Order the Telegram & Gazette, delivered daily to your home or office!