

# Traffic Stops & Teen Drivers: Staying Safe, Smart, and In- Control

---

Presented by:

D. Robert Lewis

Assistant State Attorney

# Who am I and why should you care?

---

- D. Robert Lewis – Homicide prosecutor from the State Attorney's Office
- Prosecuted thousands of serious felonies, hundreds of homicide cases
- Prosecute ALL of Hernando County's Traffic Homicide cases
- I've seen every conceivable traffic stop and seen every way they can go wrong
- ALMOST 100% OF INJURIES AND DEATHS AT TRAFFIC STOPS WERE PREVENTABLE

# State v. William McNeil

## Video 1



# What do we see?

---

- “Why did you pull me over?”
- “Can you pull up that law?”
- “Can you get a supervisor?”
- Broken window...
- PUNCH!

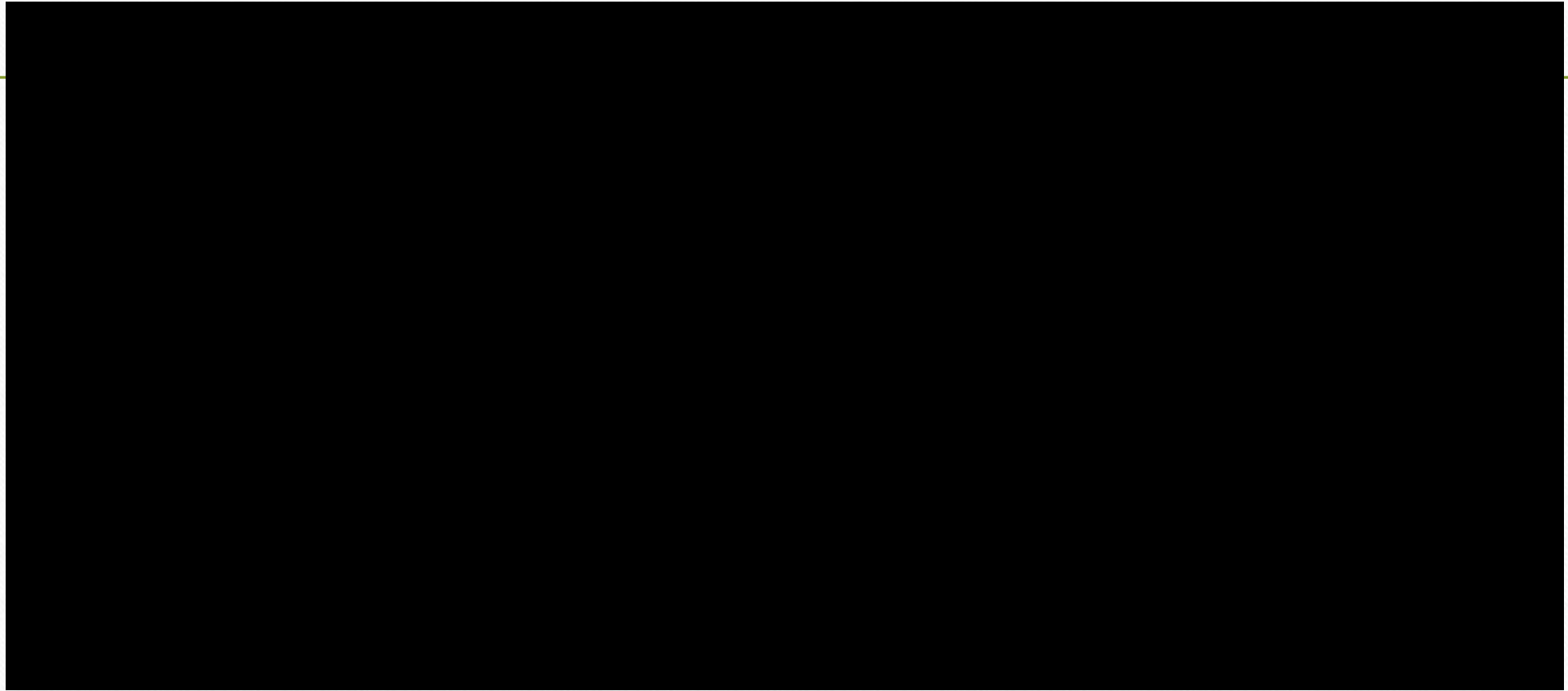
## Video 1

---

Who thinks that the cop acted improperly?

# State v. William McNeil

## Video 2



# What do we see?

---

- McNeil: “Is there a reason you pulled me over?”
- Officer: “Inclement weather and you don’t have your lights on and you’re not wearing a seatbelt”
- McNeil: “It’s light out, it’s not raining
- Officer: “I’m not arguing with you. I’m telling you why I’m pulling you over. Driver’s license and registration, please”

# What do we see?

---

- McNeil: “No! Call your supervisor (Two times)
- McNeil: “Why did you pull me over (Three times)
- Officer: “Step out of the vehicle”
- McNeil: “No!”
- Officer: “Step out of the vehicle
- McNeil: “Slams door”

## What do we see?

---

- Officer: “Open the door and exit or we are going to break the window” (Three times)
- McNeil: “No!” (Three times)

## Video 2

---

Who thinks that the cop acted improperly?

What could the Officer have done differently?

---

- NOT PUNCHING THE DRIVER!
- Anything else?

# What could McNeil have done differently?

---

- Complied with license and registration
- Be assertive, but not argumentative
- Not shutting the door and locking the car

(McNeil was going to take the ride and he knew it.)

# Why are you here today?

---

- Not anti-police
- Not pro-police
- **Pro-safety** – for both the driver *and* the officer
- Focused on **real-world, practical advice** to keep everyone safe
- Based on decades of experience prosecuting serious crimes, homicides, and traffic fatalities

# Why Traffic Stops Matter

---

- Officers never know whether they are stopping:
- A distracted teen late for school
- A person with a suspended license
- Someone fleeing a crime
- Someone armed, intoxicated, or panicked
- From the officer's perspective, **every stop has unknown risks.**

# What gives you the right?!!

A law-enforcement officer in Florida has the legal authority to conduct a traffic stop when they have **reasonable suspicion or probable cause** that a traffic law or other law has been violated, as authorized under **Florida Statutes (Chs. 316 & 901)**, the **Florida Constitution**, and the **Fourth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution.



# The Supreme what?



- **Whren v. United States (U.S. Supreme Court, 1996)** – Officers may stop
  - a vehicle if they observe any traffic violation,
  - no matter how minor.
- **State v. Donaldson (Fla. Supreme Court, 2001)**
  - – Reinforced that a traffic stop
  - in Florida must be based on a reasonable,
  - articulable suspicion of a violation.

# This can't happen to me

---

- Antwon Rose (2018, Pennsylvania)
- A 17-year-old, **Antwon Rose**, was a *passenger* in a car that was stopped by police in East Pittsburgh. [CBS News](#)
- According to reports, when officers detained the driver, Rose and another passenger fled on foot. [CBS News](#)
- An officer shot Rose three times; he later died. [CBS News](#)
- Although guns were subsequently recovered in the vehicle, Rose himself was unarmed at the time he fled. [CBS News+1](#)

# This can't happen to me

---

## Jordan Edwards (2017, Texas)

- Jordan Edwards was 15 years old.
- He was shot and killed by a Balch Springs, Texas, police officer while riding in a car during a traffic stop.
- Notably, he was *unarmed* and in the process of the vehicle *pulling away*.

# This can't happen to me

---

- **17-Year-Old Shot by Texas DPS Trooper (2025, Texas)**
- More recently, in January 2025, a **17-year-old** was shot by a Texas Department of Public Safety trooper during a traffic stop. [KPRC](#)
- According to authorities, after the teen was ordered out of the car, the trooper said he saw a sudden motion toward the teen's waistband and fired. [KPRC](#)
- The teen was hospitalized but was reported to be alive and talking after the incident. [KPRC](#)

## Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

---

- **Broken Tail Light → Driver Panic**
- A Florida teen reached quickly into his glovebox for registration.
- Officer misinterpreted the rapid movement.
- Tense, escalated moment until hands were visible again.  
*Lesson: fast, unexplained movements create fear on both sides.*

## Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

---

- **Speeding Stop → Hidden Weapon**
- In a “simple speeding” stop, an officer spotted a handgun on the passenger floor.
- Driver failed to mention it; officer became defensive and escalated commands.

*Lesson: Unexpected surprises heighten danger.*

## Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

---

- **Failure to Pull Over Immediately**
- A teen drove a full mile trying to “find a safe parking lot,” causing the officer to think they were fleeing.

*Lesson: Delay can create suspicion—acknowledge the officer with hazard lights if driving to a safer area.*

## Real-Life Examples – When Routine Stops Went Wrong

---

- **Driver Arguing Instead of Complying**
- A stop for loud music escalated when the driver argued about “knowing his rights.”
- Refusal to keep hands visible led to the driver being temporarily detained.

*Lesson: Rights can be asserted politely without escalating.*

# What's Going Through an Officer's Mind

---

- Officers are trained to consider:
- Visibility of hands – most important safety factor
- Number of passengers
- Any sudden movements
- Vehicle behavior before stopping
- Odors (alcohol, marijuana, smoke)
- Driver behavior (nervousness, reaching, refusal to roll window down)
- Location and lighting

# What You Should Do Immediately When Pulled Over

---

- Acknowledge the officer
- Turn on hazard lights if you need to move to a safer, well-lit location.
- Pull to the right and stop safely.
- Turn off the engine.
- Roll down the window.
- Turn off music.
- Keep hands visible on the steering wheel.
- At night: turn on the interior light.

# Where Hands Should Be During a Traffic Stop

---

- **Both hands on top of the steering wheel**  
where the officer can clearly see them
- Passengers: hands visible on laps
- If document retrieval is needed, say:
  - “Officer, my registration is in the glovebox—may I reach for it?”
- Wait for the officer’s approval before moving.

## How to Speak to Law Enforcement— Polite but Assertive

---

- “Good evening, officer.”
- “May I reach for my license now?”
- “I would like to remain polite, but I’m nervous—  
can you walk me through what you need?”

## How to Speak to Law Enforcement— Polite but Assertive

---

- “I am choosing not to answer questions without a parent present.”
- “I do not consent to a search.”  
(if asked—this is lawful and not disrespectful)

# What NOT to Do

---

- **Don't reach suddenly for anything**
- Don't argue roadside
- Don't exit the vehicle unless instructed
- Don't conceal or hide items
- Don't make jokes about weapons or drugs
- Don't record aggressively (recording is legal, but be obvious and calm)

# When an Officer May Search a Vehicle (Without Consent)

---

- **Probable Cause Exists**
- Examples:
  - Smell of marijuana or strong alcohol
  - Visible contraband (bottle, pipe, firearm)
  - Drug residue seen on seats
  - Admissions by the driver (“There’s weed in the car”)

# When an Officer May Search a Vehicle (Without Consent)

---

## **Arrest of the Driver**

If the driver is arrested, officers may search within reach of the driver (the “passenger compartment” in many situations).

## **“Inventory Search” After Impound**

If the vehicle must be towed, officers may inventory its contents.

## **Safety Check (“Protective Sweep”)**

If an officer reasonably believes there may be a weapon within reach.

# Consent Searches

---

- If the officer asks:
- “Do you mind if I search your vehicle?”
- The driver has the absolute right to say:
- **“I do not consent to a search.”**
- This cannot be held against the driver.  
It also cannot be used as probable cause.

# Drug-Sniffing K9s – What the Law Allows

---

- **K9s May Walk Around the Car During a Lawful Traffic Stop**
- Officers can conduct a “free air sniff” around the exterior of the car.
- They cannot unreasonably prolong the stop just to wait for a K9 unit.
- **If the Dog Alerts**
- An alert from a trained K9 **does provide probable cause** to search the vehicle.

# Drug-Sniffing K9s – What the Law Allows

---

- **The Officer Does NOT Need:**
  - A warrant
  - The driver's consent
  - A specific suspicion other than the alert

# What to Do If You Disagree With the Officer

---

- Stay calm
- Comply with orders
- Do NOT argue law on the roadside
- Ask politely for clarification
- Save disagreements for court, not the shoulder of the highway

## What to Do If You Disagree With the Officer

---

“Officer, I want to comply with all lawful instructions. I do not consent to a search, but I will not interfere.”

# Things You Need to Remember

---

- Lack of experience = increased nervousness
- Peer passengers often escalate tension
- Social media posting during stops can distract or inflame
- Recognize the seriousness of body language and tone

# Final Safety Tips

---

- Always carry license, registration, proof of insurance
- Keep documents in an easy-to-reach location
- Practice retrieval calmly
- Stay respectful even if you feel wronged
- Record the encounter if you wish, but calmly
- Call a parent if needed

# Why This Matters

---

- Safer interactions
- Fewer misunderstandings
- Protects the driver's rights
- Helps officers do their job safely
- Reduces the risk of tragic outcomes

**D. Robert Lewis**  
**Assistant State Attorney**

**Felony Division Docket Manager**  
**Homicide Division**

**William M. Gladson, State Attorney**  
**Office of the State Attorney, Fifth Judicial Circuit**  
**(352) 540-6484 office**  
**(813) 505-7841 mobile**  
**Dlewis@SAO5.org**

