

Safety first for police during traffic stops

By Christina Chapman

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In all of my experiences being pulled over, which is more than I'd like to admit, I have done the same thing wrong every time - I've leaned over and gotten my insurance card and license before the officer has even approached my car.

Apparently this is a no-no. All the officer can see is me leaning, and immediately the officer's guard is up because he or she doesn't know if I'm reaching for a gun or some sort of weapon.

The proper thing to do is to wait for the officer to come to your car and ask for the materials. This way the officer can watch where you are reaching and what you are taking out.

"We have to expect the unexpected. No two traffic stops are alike," said Patrolwoman Jessica Smith, who taught the sixth class of the Morris Citizen's Police Academy on April 22.

And based on some of the videos of traffic stops Smith shared with us, she's not kidding. We watched one of an officer pulling over a driver for his music being too loud, and before the officer could even ask for his license the suspect shot the officer in the face.

It's no wonder officers are so cautious when pulling over someone, even when it is a little person like me.

"Maybe we're not as courteous as you think we should be, but officer safety is No. 1," Smith said.

We learned the difference between a low-level traffic stop and a high-level traffic stop. I am typically your low-level stop - speeding, roll stops, forgetting a turn signal, you know, the common reasons for being stopped.

But a high-level stop, also known as a felony stop, is when you know a felony has been committed. For instance, an officer is chasing a bank robber or a known murderer. There are some simple differences between the two kinds of stops, but these simple differences can be lifesaving.

Such as positioning your squad 30 feet behind the violator rather than 10 feet to 15 feet. Possibly angling the car so an officer can hide behind the engine block if shots are fired. And having the violator exit the vehicle rather than the officer approaching the car.

Once again, our fellow alumni from the Citizen's Police Academy Alumni Association came to class to assist with the role playing. I deliberately volunteered first to "pull someone over" so I wouldn't be tricked this time. My plan worked.

I wasn't exactly the perfect officer, but I called the plate in and checked the trunk and back seat on my way to the driver. Although the driver tried to get out of her ticket for doing 40 mph in a 20 mph zone, I stuck to it and gave her a ticket.

I did tell her to have a nice day, but Smith advised me not to do that since the driver might think I'm trying to be a smart-aleck.

Next class is on evidence collection, but as we've already learned, it will not be like "CSI: Miami."

Listen to reporter Christina Chapman discuss issues concerning the Southwest Weekly area at 4:40 p.m. Wednesdays on WJOL-AM (1340).

Christina Chapman can be reached at (815)792-6172 or by e-mail at cchapman@scnl.com