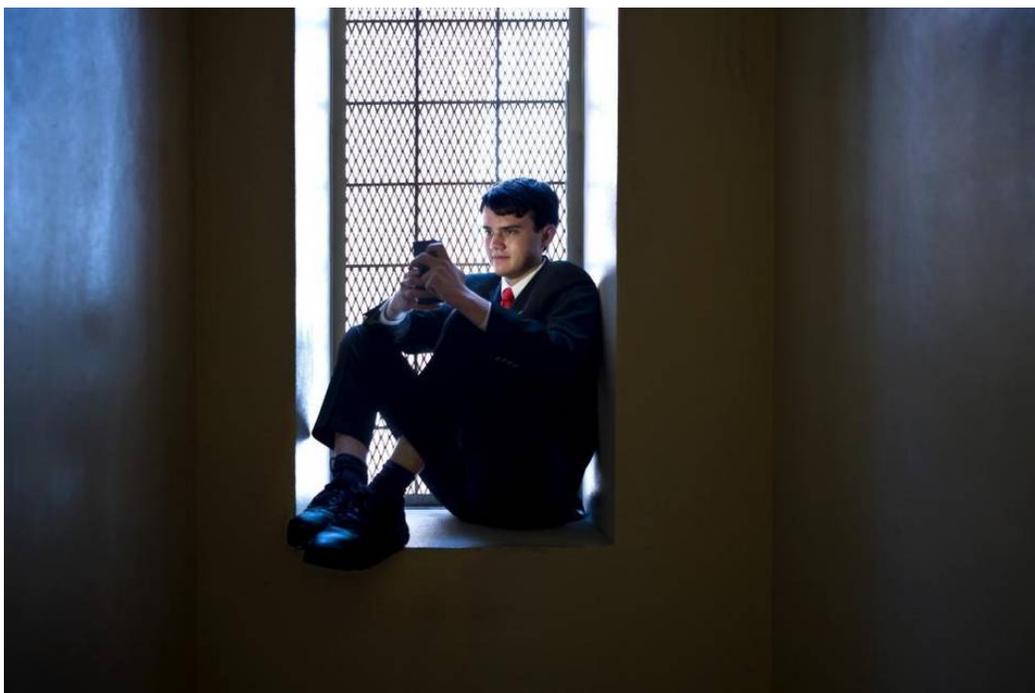


EDUCATION MARCH 24, 2017 6:30 AM

Miami teen leading charge to outlaw texting while driving



BY KYRA GURNEY
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At 17, Mark Merwitzer might be Florida's youngest lobbyist.

The Miami high school junior is on a mission to keep drivers from texting behind the wheel and he says he won't stop until it's a state law.

Over the past year, the teen has met with youth councils, county officials and state legislators to argue that texting behind the wheel should be a primary offense — meaning police can pull drivers over just for using their phones, instead of issuing a ticket only if they are stopped for another infraction. With the help of Sen. Rene Garcia, R-Hialeah, Merwitzer has championed a bill that has so far cleared several hurdles. Similar efforts in past years have struggled to advance, but on Wednesday the bill got unanimous support from the Senate transportation committee.

"I'm personally very tired of seeing people's lives thrown away because of texting while driving," said Merwitzer, who does not yet have his driver's license, but said he sees motorists on their phones all the time on Miami highways.



WE NEED TO TEACH YOUNG DRIVERS HOW TO PROPERLY AND SAFELY USE TECHNOLOGY BEHIND THE WHEEL, WHICH IS NOT USING IT AT ALL.

Miami high school student Mark Merwitzer

Distracted driving, which includes texting behind the wheel — defined by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles as one of the most dangerous distractions — causes thousands of accidents in the state every year. Texting has been a secondary offense since 2013, but distracted motorists have continued to crash, causing 214 deaths and more than 45,000 accidents in 2015 alone. Thirty-nine states have already made texting while driving a primary offense, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"We need to teach young drivers how to properly and safely use technology behind the wheel, which is not using it at all," said Merwitzer, who initially proposed making texting a primary offense only for drivers under the age of 18. The bill sponsored by Sen. Garcia would apply to all drivers.

For the 17-year-old Palmetto Bay resident, advocating for a new state law has been a whirlwind experience. Over the past year, Merwitzer has acquired a contact list that would be the envy of any lobbyist, political ambitions and the attire to match: an American flag pin on his suit lapel.

45,740

The number of car crashes caused by distracted drivers in Florida in 2015

Like many Miami residents, Merwitzer has seen countless drivers texting behind the wheel. But last spring, while he was riding in the passenger seat of a vehicle on the MacArthur Causeway, Merwitzer saw thumbs clicking across smartphone screens in almost every car and a few drivers appeared to swerve as they sped along. It dawned on Merwitzer that no one was doing anything to fix the problem.

After meeting Miami-Dade Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava at a townhall meeting, Merwitzer interned in her office over the summer. In Florida, local jurisdictions are prohibited from instituting their own texting bans, so Merwitzer turned his focus to drumming up local support for a state law by starting an online petition and speaking to youth commissions and village councils.

Merwitzer said the first time he spoke at a council meeting “was a complete stutter fest,” but he quickly adapted to politics. By November, Merwitzer was in contact with Sen. Garcia, who filed a bill in December.

Thanks in part to Merwitzer’s advocacy, according to Commissioner Levine Cava, the Miami-Dade County Commission voted to make the bill one of its top 10 legislative requests for the year.

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OUR DRIVERS ARE DISTRACTED UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Miami-Dade Commissioner Daniella Levine Cava

“Our drivers are distracted under the best of circumstances because there’s so much to see in Miami so it really creates some standards that help everybody realize the importance of keeping their eyes on the road,” said Levine Cava. The commissioner has been so impressed with Merwitzer’s grasp of the political process that she has included him in strategy sessions. “He really learned very quickly how to be an effective citizen lobbyist,” she said.

Although texting appears to be the preferred means of communication for teens, who would likely be significantly impacted by the new law, Merwitzer said he’s gotten a lot of support from young people. That includes his classmates at the School for Advanced Studies, a dual-enrollment program that allows high school students to take Miami Dade College courses.

“They see how dangerous it can be,” Merwitzer said. “They’re new drivers. I’m sure they’ve probably had an experience where they’ve been on the phone and something may have happened to them.”

So far, opposition to the bill has come mainly from police departments worried about the potential for lawsuits if officers are accused of racially profiling drivers while enforcing the texting ban, Merwitzer said. The bill also has critics in the House, where lawmakers have yet to schedule a hearing.

Merwitzer has done most of his advocacy from Miami, where he is in frequent communication with one of the lobbyists hired by the county commission to push for Miami-Dade’s legislative priorities. In early March, however, the teen traveled to Tallahassee to speak at a committee meeting. The legislators and lobbyists he met had one question for him: “When are you running?” To which Merwitzer responded, half-jokingly, “Hopefully soon.”

Merwitzer said he would one day like to be a state legislator, but in the meantime he has a few short-term goals, like finishing school and going to college. Once the legislative session is over, Merwitzer also plans to turn his attention to another local problem: public transportation.

“I’d like to focus on that,” Merwitzer said. “It seems like it’s a giant mess.”



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