

“What Do I Tell Him (Her) Now?”

By Warner Durnell, Executive Presbyter

There is a drill that parents of African American sons and daughters take their children through whenever they become old enough to drive a car or even ride in an automobile with friends. * The drill consists of actually taking them through a scenario whereby the car they are in gets pulled over by the police. The script may be slightly different from household to household, but the substance is the same, *“When you get pulled over by the police, be respectful, compliant and cooperative. It can save your life.”*



On Friday, June 16th, a St. Paul, Minnesota, jury acquitted former police officer Jeronimo Yanez of criminal conduct in the shooting death of a black motorist, Philando Castile, back in July of 2016. On Tuesday audio-video footage of this shooting from the police car’s dashboard camera was released to the public. It showed Officer Yanez and another police officer approaching on foot the now parked car. Philando Castile, a 32-year-old elementary school cafeteria supervisor, is seated in the car, along with his girlfriend and her four-year-old child. It’s broad daylight and allegedly the car is stopped because of a broken taillight [Office Yanez later testified that he pulled the car over because he thought one of the occupants, Philando, matched the description of someone involved in an armed robbery earlier.]

There was no disrespectful verbal exchange, no raised voices, no threats aimed at the officers from anyone inside the car. Philando was what every parent of an African American child drills into them to be when stopped by a cop - respectful, compliant, and cooperative. He even *volunteers* information to the officers that he has a gun permit and prepares to show the officers his license and permit when Officer Yanez verbally commands him not to reach for his gun (which Mr. Castile wasn’t doing), and then fires off seven shots. Philando’s last words were, “I wasn’t reaching...”

When asked, Officer Yanez testified that he was frightened, fearful that his life was in danger, so he acted as he did. Yanez saw Mr. Castile as a scary, black, armed robber. I cannot help but wonder if Office Yanez ever considered that the people inside the car might be as nervous and afraid as he, and fully as human? The other officer seemingly sensed no danger, no threat, not even drawing his weapon. The second officer does rescue the four-year old child who exits the car once Officer Yanez stops shooting.

My high regard for law enforcers is something I wrote about in an earlier MID-TENN article after police came under fire and were killed in Dallas. But do not law abiding citizens deserve the same kind of regard from police officers and not be viewed initially as “suspect” because of the color of their skin, the braiding of their hair, or the shape of their nose! ** So...what do I tell my son who is the same age as Philando would have been today? What do parents of African American children tell their sons and daughters now? I believe we must continue to instruct them to be considerate and cooperative when police pull them over. But no more can we say that, *“It can save your life,”* because it might not!

*I have recently learned that some parents of white teenagers have a similar drill.

**Officer Yanez said that the shape of Philando’s nose is why he thought he was a robbery suspect.