

By: Chhaya Sanghavi

All of 17, a senior at Leto High, Karishma Mahtani is a driven, dedicated, self motivated, assertive and confident girl who leaves no stone unturned when she is out to achieve her goal. The mammoth task she has taken on is about keeping our teenagers safe while driving. Karishma's proposed House Bill 1127 is an enhanced penalty. It does not ban the use of handheld electronic devices, but instead it enhances the penalty for teenagers from ages 15-17 (if they are using handheld electronic devices while driving) that receive a citation for a traffic violation in the state of Florida. If a teenager is being cited for a violation, he/she will be charged additional \$50 fine and one point assessment on his/her driver's license.

CM: Please tell us a little bit about your background.

KM: I was born in High Point, NC. I moved to Tampa when I was 10 years old with my older brother, Roshan, and younger brother, Venai. My dad's side of the family is originally from Poona and he owns a motel while my mom is a personal trainer and is not Indian. I had the best of both worlds growing up.

My mom has been very excited about the opportunity I have but it took some time explaining the process and what I am actually doing as far as my dad's side of the family is concerned. My dad is extremely proud of me and both my parents have been totally supportive.

CM: How did you get involved with this?

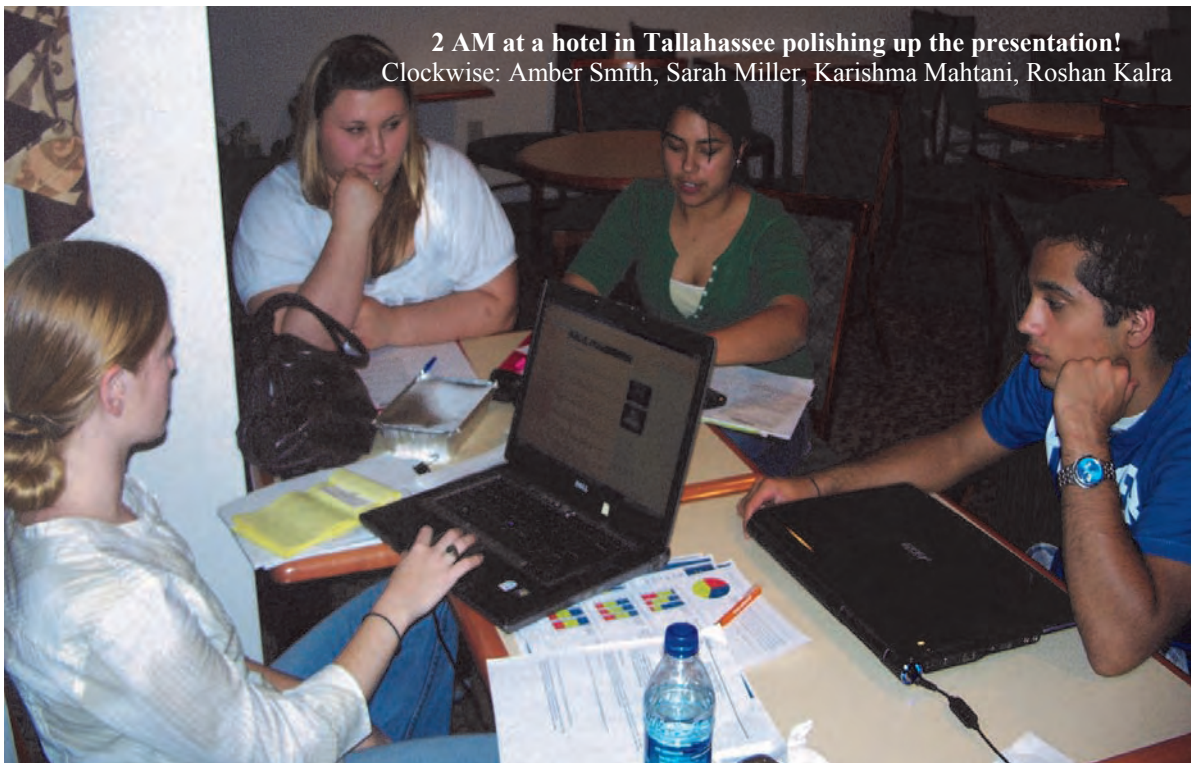
KM: It all started when I entered a competition "Ought to be a Law". I began to compose a proposal for a bill. I needed my "bill"



to concerns about teenagers using cell phones while driving. After extensive research on this topic, I found that laws restricting teens from using cell phones while operating motor vehicles have already

been implemented in numerous states, but not Florida.

2 AM at a hotel in Tallahassee polishing up the presentation!
Clockwise: Amber Smith, Sarah Miller, Karishma Mahtani, Roshan Kalra



After I adopted the idea of prohibiting teens from using cell phones while driving, I continued with research to assure a concrete foundation for my bill proposal. I interviewed Hillsborough County Traffic Homicide Detective, Mark Tucker. This interview became a turning point in my bill. I found that cell phone usage is not the only problem while driving; Detective Tucker also witnessed teens driving while playing with portable gaming devices, lap tops, and mp3 players!

I altered my proposal to include the restriction of

to be feasible, which means it had to be low budget, non-controversial, and, ideally, pertain to youth. Teens' safety while driving had been a common theme at many Hillsborough County Student Government meetings, which eventually led my thoughts

ALL handheld electronic devices while driving. With the assistance of Detective Tucker, I was able to create a unique approach to penalizing teens for this violation, via an enhanced penalty. Other

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states provide a primary or secondary penalty to the infringement, but through an enhanced penalty I am able to educate teens on safe driving habits without costing the state any money as there is no need for a separate statute number.

CM: Why are you targeting just teens?

KM: Several studies state that teenagers have a higher tendency to use a handheld electronic device, even while driving. These teenagers are just starting to drive, this is the time to educate them about the dangers before they form bad habits and the problems continue into their adulthood. It is about establishing better driving habits at the very beginning.

CM: You had mentioned that a similar bill was proposed in 2007, what happened with that?

KM: It was filed in 2007 and it even went to 2008 session but it failed. I had to figure out what was wrong with that approach and find a way to overcome that when we went to competition. The difference in what I am doing is significant enough to make my bill pass, especially now that Representative Kevin Ambler and Senator Victor Crist have agreed to sponsor my bill and are very supportive and positive about it.

CM: How do you feel about all the support you have from your teacher, family, friends?

KM: It feels great! My teacher has been my inspiration and the reason why I got involved with this bill in the first place. She has actually got a bill passed 8 years ago and she knows the process and the hard work required. My parents have been very supportive and encouraging, after the initial stumbles with my dad's side of the family. My little brother, Venai, is sort of, like, uneducated (laughs) - he doesn't understand, but my older brother is right there with me!

CM: What do you like to do in your free time?

KM: FREE TIME? What is that?

Well, I enjoy shopping, doing the usual girl stuff, listening to music, hanging out with my friends, going for long walks on the beach - I love going to the beach! I play the Oboe, I am big music person!

I am also the council president for my school, where I organize and run any school-wide event like homecoming, proms etc. I work very hard. I do well at school. I want to excel in everything I do.

CM: What are your plans for the future?

KM: I am going to FSU! I want to study Political Science and possibly Law. I want to work with government projects.

CM: Have you been to India? Do you watch Bollywood movies?

KM: We go to India almost every other year, I have been there 7-8 times.

Bollywood movies, definitely! I enjoy watching them in moderation. I would say that Bollywood movies are an exaggeration, oh... can I tell you about *Slumdog Millionaire*? I loved it. I believe that the atmosphere of poverty and the children on the streets is a fairly accurate interpretation of certain parts of India. It does not mean that the entire country is like that, but it is also the reality.

CM: How does it feel to be Indian and doing what you do? Do you think you have an added advantage?

KM: Personally, it was a bit challenging initially with the Bill, because of the lack of education in my family for the process. Now they understand that I am trying to make a difference and be heard. On being Indian, it has been extremely beneficial because Indian families are very supportive and we like to see each other succeed. It is a close knit community and it is great to see all the support. I am different and the difference stands out more. The non-Indians have liked and appreciated my uniqueness, learned about me and what I am and what my day to day life is about.

CM: What is the next step with the bill?

KM: It was heard in the first committee and now I am waiting to hear from them that it has been put on the agenda for the next committee. Bills are normally heard in 2 committees and once in council in both, the House and the Senate. Assuming that it passes every committee then it will be heard on the floor by midnight on May 1st and then it will become a law!

CM: How can someone help you?

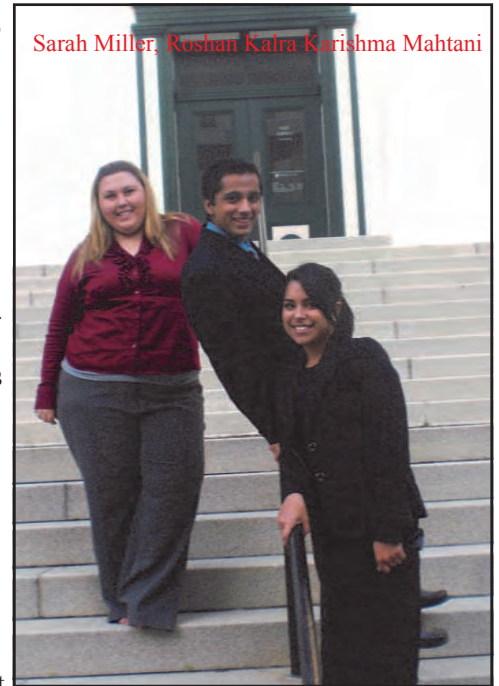
KM: Any citizen in the state of Florida that is in favor of this bill may contact their local home representative or senator and let them know that they are in favor of the bill so that their representative or senator can vote on the bill.

CM: What do you hope to see come out of this?

KM: I am hoping that it will become a law. However, whether it does or not, I hope that the coverage it is receiving will make people aware of the dangers that distracted driving can cause.

CM: Message to our readers?

KM: Please contact your representative and support House Bill 1127. You may even find out who your representative is on the internet. Please visit www.myflorida.com, type in your zip code and contact your representative. You can even email your support to them.



Sarah Miller, Roshan Kalra Karishma Mahtani



Kimberly Garcia

