

16 Year Old Anti-War Protester Arrested In Palm Harbor, Florida

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Writer's note: *This article was written on Sunday 10/23, and would have been released nationally, but due to Hurricane Wilma I have been busy covering the disaster and the ongoing relief efforts. I am now releasing it to show the disparity between the St. Petersburg Times coverage and that of mine from the scene as an eyewitness.*

Palm Harbor, FL (CFTM) On October 22, at approximately 4:00 pm, deputies from the Pinellas County, FL Sheriffs Department arrested a 16-year-old boy who was engaged in a peaceful roadside demonstration.

The groups St. Pete for Peace, St Pete Food Not Bombs, and the Curlew Bloggers were having a street corner demonstration against the Iraq war and the Bush administration.

The teenager was standing on the side of the road holding a sign that said "F*ck Bush". The Pinellas County Sheriff's Department spokeswoman Marianne Pasha told the St. Petersburg Times the arrest resulted from the disruption to traffic and the teen's refusal to move. When I contacted the department on Saturday they refused to discuss the case or any of the issues of the arrest. (Because of his age, the department cannot release the teenager's name.)

Deputies told me they were called to U.S. 19 and Curlew Road after a motorist called to complain about the sign. "The complainant had to steer around (the teenager)," Pasha said. During the incident the deputies claimed to have received over 25 complaints and admitted people were using 911 to report the sign and also complaining about the demonstration in general.



Teenager being led away by deputies. PHOTO-MARK DUFF

Deputies claim the 16-year-old antiwar demonstrator stood in the road and refused to move

when ordered. I was present and recorded the entire incident on audiotape and also viewed the video taken by Chris Ernesto, an organizer for St. Pete For Peace. At no time was the teenager in traffic or blocking the right of way in any way. Numerous bystanders and eyewitnesses not involved with the peace demonstration reported that he never entered the roadway during the incident.

Pasha told the Times that the teenager cursed deputies when they asked him to move out of traffic. According to the Times and a deputy on scene, he was arrested on charges of disorderly conduct, breach of the peace and unlawful use of a state transportation facility - i.e., the road.



Corporal Atkins holding the sign for approximately two minutes while passers by screamed and yelled at him to put it down. PHOTO-MARK DUFF

I was standing right next to the teenager and recorded the verbal discussion between him and the deputies. I have listened to the tape over twenty times, and at no point did he ever use any profanity or abusive words towards the deputies. On the tape you can clearly hear Corporal Atkins asking for the teenager's identification, then making the statement "I was planning on arresting you anyway."

He then said that he wasn't going to arrest the teenager if he put down the sign, but after asking myself and Chris Ernesto to turn off our recording devices and getting a refusal from us, he went ahead with the arrest. A heated argument ensued between the teen's mother and arresting deputies, but there were never any abusive or profane words exchanged between the teen and deputies.

Mark Donnelly of Tarpon Springs, FL was parked at a nearby restaurant. He witnessed the events leading up to the arrest and was outraged at deputies treatment of the teen.

"I'm a Republican and I support George Bush to the end. That doesn't matter because these protesters should have the right to be here no matter what I believe in," he stated angrily. "I thought this was America, what the hell are they doing arresting a kid? I don't agree with the protest, but he didn't do anything wrong. I never saw him go into the road, and I watched the whole thing for about ten minutes before the sheriffs got here. They just came up and arrested him because someone didn't like his sign. That's not what democracy is supposed to be about. Just because someone didn't like his sign, that doesn't mean they can abuse the 911 system and get the police involved. The ones who called 911 should be getting arrested instead of a kid."

The deputies initially involved in the arrest were Corporal Atkins, Deputy Earl, Deputy Loftus, and a fourth deputy whom Cpl. Atkins declined to identify. An additional scene supervisor, Corporal Felicetta, arrived on the scene after about ten minutes had elapsed.

Cpl. Felicetta and Cpl. Atkins were observed attempting to interrogate the teen without a lawyer or legal guardian being present. The teen's mother was standing about twenty feet away and asked on several occasions to be a witness to any interrogation or questioning. Deputies refused her requests and threatened to arrest her if she did not leave the scene.

The threats of arrest against the teen's mother and her other son were repeated numerous

times, and can be clearly heard on audio of the incident. Deputies also threatened to arrest members of the crowd that had gathered, and they became quite hostile in their attempts to prevent the crowd from gathering and asking them questions.

After remaining on scene with the teen in the cruiser for over thirty minutes, deputies finally took him to the juvenile assessment center. He was released to his mother's custody approximately an hour after the incident.

The original responding deputies and an additional ten to fifteen deputies then went across Curlew Rd. and threatened to arrest the entire group of protesters for not having a demonstration permit. The protest continued for approximately thirty more minutes before the demonstrators dispersed. Numerous threats of arrest and a state of general harassment continued for the entire time that the protesters were gathered.

Chris Ernesto of St. Pete for Peace says the peace groups will return to the same corner to protest in the future. "They are not going to use something like this to keep us from doing what we have a right to do," he said angrily. "This is a bunch of crap, they are just trying to keep us from having free speech and to protest where it might offend some Republicans. We'll be back, and we'll have our lawyers ready to enforce our rights to be here."

When I called the sheriff's department today, 10/25, to discuss what I had recorded on tape and personally observed, they refused to talk to me about it. The claim there is an ongoing investigation and that there is no reason to have any doubt's about deputies reports and details of the incident.



Corporal Atkins threatening to arrest the teenager's mother. All photos courtesy of Mark Duff

Here is the St. Pete Times article: Protester accused of disrupting traffic

http://sptimes.com/2005/10/23/Northpinellas/Protester_accused_of_.shtml

Here is a personal account from the protester who was arrested:

<http://stpeteforpeace.org/palmharbor.firstperson.html>

Coalition for Free Thought in Media at

<http://groups.google.com/group/Coalitionforfreethoughtinmedia>

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