

Young Drivers Challenged to be safer behind the wheel...often with the pedal down

On a sunny Sunday morning, sections of the Salem Civic Center's parking lot saw many tire-squealing maneuvers. The drivers? Teens, often with their parents a few hundred feet away, watching everything closely. They weren't racing in to get a spot because they were late to a show. They were learning how to be better drivers - especially at high speeds and especially when everything goes wrong – as students in a Tire Rack Street Survival course.

Street Survival was created with the idea that typical driver's education courses in the United States do a fine job of training drivers the rules of the road, what to do, what not to do, etc. But they don't necessarily prepare young drivers for how to best handle emergency situations at higher, conventional roadway speeds - think tire blowouts, dangerous objects in the road, or dropping two wheels off the pavement.

The daylong course includes classroom learning as well as crash-avoidance maneuvers. Among the challenges:

- A Slalom Course.
- A Skid Pad, in which corn kernels are used (yes, corn kernels) to make an area slippery and simulate the loss of tire grip one might experience in wet or icy weather
- An "Off the Road" space, where students put two wheels onto a VERY bumpy shoulder.

All with plenty of orange cones to knock around.



Hold on tight!
Tires squeal as a
car slides on
corn kernels at
the skid pad

With a nationally-certified instructor at their side, and using their own vehicle, students face these courses to better prepare for the unexpected.

The Street Survival website states students "will learn to look far enough ahead to anticipate unwise actions of other drivers. As the students master the application of physics to drive their cars, they will make fewer unwise driving actions themselves. They will understand why they should always wear their own seatbelts, and why they should insist that their passengers wear seatbelts, too."

Brett Randolph, Assistant District Traffic Engineer in VDOT's Salem District, is an organizer and long-time supporter of Street Survival.

"Highway safety is a core professional and personal commitment," Randolph said. "My experience reviewing fatal crash reports involving teens has reinforced that proper training and sound driving practices are essential to preventing these tragedies, which is why I strongly support programs such as Tire Rack Street Survival."

Let's talk safety!
Students get
classroom time
along with
road challenges



The classroom portion of the day can be every bit as important as the field exercises. This year, Tammy McGee spoke to the students and parents about her tragedy. In October of 2019, her 16-year-old son Conner accepted a ride from a friend - who did NOT have a driver's license and who DID have a desire to drive recklessly.

Minutes later, three young lives were lost: Conner, the 15-year-old driver, and one of Conner's friends, who also accepted a ride. The high-performance car was estimated to have left the road at 70+ mph in a 35-mph zone, just minutes after the boys left the high school parking lot following their homecoming dance.

Through her grief, McGee started ifyouseesomethingsaysomething.org, a website dedicated to youth driver safety. The site elicits tips from other young drivers when they see dangerous activities on the roads. The hope is intervention and possibly a warning from law enforcement, can move young drivers away from dangerous actions and toward a path of putting safety first.



Tammy Guido McGee

The cost for the Street Survival course is \$175. It includes classroom and road course training and lunch. (There are limited options for financial aid for students who wouldn't otherwise be able to attend.)

Randolph suggests any parent of a young, new driver consider it for their son or daughter.

"Parents often worry when their teens start driving, even if the kids handle everyday trips to school, work, and home. Tire Rack Street Survival helps ease those concerns by teaching teens critical emergency-handling and accident-avoidance skills. Through repeated, hands-on exercises, students learn to stay calm and respond safely in high-risk situations they may face on the road," said Randolph.

That last bit about staying calm and responding safely really sums it up. When "normal" driving isn't an option, especially at highway speeds, safety may come down to not only knowing what to do but also how to do it without panic. Whereas many young drivers will simply slam on their brakes or spin out of control, those who've been through the course will be prepared to quickly and calmly react to the appropriate maneuver they need to perform to stay alive.

Another Street Survival course is coming to the Salem Civic Center on Sunday, October 4, 2026. To register, go to streetsurvival.org and scroll down to find the Virginia schools or contact the local registrar at StreetSurvival24153@gmail.com with questions.

