

Founder of Kids and Cars saves young lives one law at a time

By GRACE HOBSON The Kansas City Star



Rich Sugg

A law on interior trunk releases was the first victory in Janette Fennell's effort to make vehicles safer for children.

The ER nurse in Georgia couldn't sleep.

Reliving the death of a toddler brought in after his mother accidentally left him in a hot car, she searched the Internet at 3 a.m. April 24 for a way to end these horrifying deaths.

She found Janette Fennell of Leawood, the go-to advocate in the country working to prevent children from dying in and around cars. It's a call she's answered hundreds of times, and she always reacts the same way.

"I have this physical thought process where my feet go in those parents' shoes," Fennell said. "And I think: Are we working fast enough? Are we working smart enough?"

Few would quibble with how hard Fennell is working to keep children from dying in cars. Fennell, 56, is the president of Kids and Cars, a home-based nonprofit that has led to safer cars in America — especially for children.

“Janette Fennell in a large way has been a catalyst for getting the entire transportation community to think not just about car crashes but the other ways in which children are injured or die in motor vehicles,” said Alan Korn, the executive director for Safe Kids USA.

Fennell began her quest 15 years ago after she had been a kidnapping victim. She crusaded to get — and got — trunk releases in cars. Hearing from more and more families about other deaths in cars, she expanded her focus to all car deaths that weren't being tracked by the government — incidents that weren't crashes and didn't happen on public roads.

Cars backing over out-of-view children. Power windows strangling children. Cars getting inadvertently shifted into gear. And, of course, children left unattended in hot cars.

“The thing that motivates me more than anything is that it's all preventable,” Fennell said.

Fennell's office door, in her home's spacious walkout lower level, has a sign announcing the national headquarters of Kids and Cars. “National” is marked out and replaced with the word “world,” which has been replaced with “universe.”

Inside is a room that's pure home office. The busy desk is large, and the cabinets are covered with pictures of her sons, Alex, 15, and Noah, 11, and their artwork.

She has one contract employee who works here with her but as many as 100 volunteers, including parents who have accidentally killed their children, throughout the country.

On a leather couch outside the office, she recounts the story that led her to this calling. On Halloween weekend 1995, Fennell, her husband, Greig, and their baby boy were returning to their San Francisco home after an evening with friends when two masked men rolled under their garage door as it closed.

The men forced the couple into the trunk of the car. They threw 9-month-old Alex, still in his car seat, outside.

The assailants drove them to a remote area, robbed them and slammed the trunk shut again. Fennell fumbled with the trunk's insulation and found a cable. Her husband pulled. *Ping*, the trunk opened.

They were reunited with Alex, who was unhurt.

A police officer told her, “You know, it never ends like this.” Which made her think: How does it usually end? The answer — and the belief that God spared her life to use her talents to save lives — got her moving.

Within two months, the former marketing executive had launched into a new career.

Her first step was to find out how often people die in car trunks.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration gathers data on deaths in automobile crashes on public roads. The government uses the numbers to see the scope of a traffic problem and to work to solve it.

But for deaths and injuries in and around cars on private property — called nontraffic — there were no numbers. Without numbers, there's no problem.

Fennell started doing Internet searches to track trunk entrapments.

“That was before Google,” Fennell said. “I would put in ‘trunk’ and ‘locked in’ and I’d get 10,000 matches, and I’d read them all. I’d get to 6,080 and there’d be a case.”

A Ford executive told her that if even a third of what she had documented was true, it's a problem.

Less than four years after Fennell started her work, the federal government made a new rule: All vehicles sold or leased in the United States as of 2002 must have glow-in-the-dark trunk releases. Since then, no one has died in a car trunk with the release, she testified to Congress.

“It's pretty remarkable that one person can have that much impact,” said Ed Bradley, regulatory affairs manager for Toyota, who considers Fennell a friend.

Bradley was so impressed with Fennell's work that he persuaded her to sell the Lexus she was kidnapped in to Toyota for display in its Torrance, Calif., museum.

As families and advocates called her about other nontraffic ways children die in and around cars, Fennell went after those, too. She counted 263 nontraffic deaths last year, for example, and 25 just last month.

“She is the founder of this issue,” said Judie Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

Fennell's numbers and exhaustive advocacy have helped bring significant change:

- She helped get safer power window switches on cars, beginning with 2010 models.
- She got the government to study the issue of cars backing over children. Called backovers, those accidents kill an average of two children a week, according to Fennell's database.
- In 2008, she helped get Congress to pass a car safety bill named after a child whose pediatrician father backed over him.

The bill required that vehicles, beginning with 2010 models, be designed so they don't go in gear unless the driver's foot is on the brake. It also required the government to tell carmakers what drivers

should be able to see when they back up. And it required the government start a database of nontraffic deaths and injuries.

“The initiative was all Kids and Cars,” said U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, a Democrat from Illinois and one of the lead sponsors of the 2008 bill.

As a result of the bill, the government has proposed requiring auto-reverse on windows that have one-touch buttons. But most of those windows already have an auto-reverse feature.

So Fennell called a news conference last fall and showed how a power window chops a carrot in half. A child’s trachea can be crushed with a fraction of the force of a power window.

“You get the picture,” Schakowsky said. “That’s what she’s good at, making policy-makers really get it, really get it in their gut.”

Fennell makes the most of her marketing talents and has been on “Oprah,” the morning news shows and the national evening news shows. She’s also been featured in the nation’s major newspapers. She merited a spread in People magazine, and Reader’s Digest called her a hero.

She is not afraid to challenge popular institutions and ideas.

She lobbied to get a Diet Pepsi commercial off the air that featured Cindy Crawford leaving her toddler and baby in her closed SUV on a warm day while she cooled off with a drink. After Fennell complained, Pepsi donated \$20,000 to Kids and Cars.

She also helped get a Corvette commercial pulled. Directed by Guy Ritchie, it showed a 10-year-old boy driving the car. She got death threats from Corvette lovers for that one.

When an Arkansas brother and sister died in the trunk of a 2000 GM car last summer, Fennell called for GM to retrofit all its 2000 and 2001 cars with trunk releases.

And she is vocal that Safe Kids USA — a well-known national organization devoted to all areas of child safety — does not do enough to challenge the auto industry to design safer cars.

Partly funded by GM, the headquarters organization is slow to push for technology changes in cars that would save lives, she says.

“If your name is Safe Kids and you can do things to protect children, you do it,” said Fennell, who praises local Safe Kids chapters around the country.

Korn, the group’s executive director who praised Fennell, defends Safe Kids’ work.

“We’re both working for the same cause,” Korn said. “We spend every day thinking about children, not just in cars, but in cribs, toy safety, bike safety, pedestrian safety, choking, poisoning.”

Now, Fennell is lobbying for alerts that signal when back seat passengers aren't buckled up and sensors that notify drivers if there is a weight in the back seat while the car is being locked.

The technology exists; it alerts us when we've left our car's lights on, she points out.

"What do you want, a dead car battery or a dead child?" Fennell said. "Somehow we've made that choice for the American public."

On average, 37 children die a year from being left in hot cars. In addition to the technological changes in cars, Fennell is on a mission to get parents to understand how these deaths happen — and how they can happen to anyone.

The public thinks the deaths happen to deadbeat parents, but Fennell knows these moms and dads. They're the ones with baby gates and toilet locks. They call her after finding Kids and Cars on the Internet.

"She listened," said Mary Parks of Virginia, whose 23-month-old son, Juan, died in 2007 when Parks left him in the car in her parking lot at work.

Over time, Fennell told a grieving and distraught Parks about the science of memory. How the part of the brain governing routine tasks can take over, like when you're in the shower and you can't remember whether you've washed your hair. Fatigue, stress, a change in routine can alter how you remember.

"I fully believed when I got out of the car that my child was at day care," said Parks, who went to the child care center at the end of the day to pick up her son.

Fennell calls that misremembering, which happens in some of the cases. She wants other parents to know they also could misremember or simply forget that their child is in the car. The stressful day, the change in routine, can happen to anyone, she said.

"If you think it can't happen to you, you're setting yourself up for disaster," Fennell said.

In her home, Fennell stands before a framed picture collage of 46 smiling and happy children, all now dead, many of them inadvertently and horribly killed by their parents.

"They are so beautiful and so perfect. And their lives are gone in one second."

Safety tips

- Always place something you'll need in the back seat, like a purse, briefcase or wallet.
- Place a teddy bear in the car seat when your child is not in it. When your child is in the car, place the teddy bear in the front seat as a reminder.

- Tell your child's day care center or baby sitter that you will always call if your child will not be there as scheduled. Ask them to phone you if your child doesn't show up when expected. Give child care providers all your telephone numbers, including that of an extra family member or friend, so they can always confirm the whereabouts of your child.
- Keep vehicles locked at all times, and always set your parking brake.
- Walk around and behind a vehicle before moving it.
- Teach children to never play in, around or behind a vehicle.
- Know where your kids are. Make children move away from your vehicle to a place where they are in full view before you move the car, and ensure that another adult is supervising them.

Janette Fennell's successes

- She got the government to require glow-in-the-dark trunk releases in vehicles as of 2002.
- She helped get safer power window switches on cars, beginning with 2010 models.
- She got the government to study the issue of cars backing over children.
- She helped get the government to require that vehicles be designed so they don't go in gear unless the driver's foot is on the brake, beginning with 2010 models.

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