

Baby's death 1st U.S. hot car fatality of year

Posted: Wednesday, March 9, 2011 6:03 pm By J. Louise Larson New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung

NEW BRAUNFELS — It's a terrible statistic: Texas leads the nation in child vehicular heat stroke deaths.

A New Braunfels baby died Tuesday, still strapped into her carseat after spending nine hours in her mother's sun-heated car. The 6-month-old became a national statistical tragedy — she's believed to be the first child to die that way in the U.S. in 2011.

"Last year was the worst year ever — there was 49 fatalities. We've never had a year that bad," said Janette Fennell, founder and president of KidsandCars.org, a voice for educating the public and lobbying for stricter safety standards.

"Texas, unfortunately, has more child vehicular heat stroke deaths than any other state in the Union," Fennell said in an interview Wednesday.

After a workday that ended in a nightmare for New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung staffer Kayla Carlson and her family, police investigators are awaiting autopsy results in the 6-month-old's death; preliminary evidence indicated the baby had been unknowingly been left in the car, said NBPD spokesman Lt. Michael Penschorn.

A flood of comments expressing support or vitriol have come in regarding the Carlson tragedy via phone and the Internet.

People shouldn't rush to judgment, Fennell said.

She is working with a memory expert on a film documentary, and said everything she has learned about the science of memory has led her to conclude the hippocampus — the oldest part of the brain, the part that makes it possible to end up at home without remembering driving there — is a huge part of the problem.

"Competing parts of the memory," she calls it.

"The front part tells me I've got to stop and get the mail, I may even have the key in my hand — but the hippocampus takes over. I'm trying to override it, but it's so strong it just takes over," she said. Stress, fatigue, hormones, routines — all things that can weaken the front part of the brain's hold on an idea — and make the hippocampus stronger, she said.

"Changes in normal routine set us up for failure — a detour, a phone call," Fennell said of the seemingly impossible notion that a good parent could "forget" a child sleeping soundly in a carseat in the back of the family car.

"We need to understand that this is not about bad parenting ... this is everything to do with how our minds let us down," she said.

'I believed I had taken her'

Jodie Edwards is a professor of counseling at a small Midwestern Christian university. In August 2008, she unknowingly left her infant daughter asleep in her car when she went to work.

Edwards spoke with the Herald-Zeitung about her daughter's death — a day that still haunts her.

“The day I unknowingly left my daughter, I had a small change in routine. I was supposed to drop the kids two places instead of one. I was driving on the way to work, and I started visualizing in my mind how I would get her into the baby-sitter’s while she was still sleeping and she could have a morning nap,” she recalled.

“My brain filled in the missing pieces. Somehow, I believed I had taken her. With the routine change plus the visualization of dropping her off, all day I believed she was safe at the baby-sitter’s,” she said.

That day, Edwards had a typical, productive workday, secure in the notion her two children were safe in the hands of their prospective caregivers.

She sent an e-mail to friend describing how big the baby was getting. She watched her cell phone, half-expecting a call regarding an ear infection she was concerned about. She put up a new picture of the baby in the office.

“There were many times throughout the day I thought about her — it’s not a scatterbrained, uncaring, selfish person distracted by work — this happens to normal parents who are very loving,” she said.

And then she left work.

“When I saw my daughter in the car, I wondered who put her there? How did she get there?”

When it hit home that her baby was still in the carseat — and that she was dead — Edwards was in shock.

“Finding my child dead was paralyzing. Gut-wrenching doesn’t even come close to describing it — I felt like I died,” she said.

Put something in back seat

There was nothing deficient in her mothering — it was her memory that was fatally flawed, giving her the solid belief she had dropped her daughter off at the sitter, Edwards said.

“People ask, ‘How could you forget your child all day? How could you not think of your child all day?’ It’s not truly forgetting ... In most cases, there’s been a small change in routine, and the brain is such a powerful force it fills in the missing pieces and make us think we did something.

“We do that regularly in our lives with inconsequential matters — you might think you told a friend something, or that you put a letter in the mail. Research shows that the value of that thing or your connection to it doesn’t make a difference (in your ability to remember it),” she said.

Edwards and her husband are now the parents of two children, ages 5 and 1, and are expecting another child.

Her 2008 loss has had a profound effect on her family’s transportation routines, she said.

“I think the most important thing is to put something in your back seat with any small children you’re transporting — your purse, your briefcase, your cell phone. It’s not because that thing is more important than your child, but because you wouldn’t get very far in your day without that item before going back and checking,” she said.

“My husband and I always check in with each other after we drop the kids off,” she said.

“I keep a bracelet in the car seat, and when I put the baby in the carseat, I put it on ... I do not take the bracelet off until my child is safely dropped at daycare,” she said. “I put mine right there in her carseat so I have to move it to put her in.”

As a counselor, Edwards had heard her own clients talk about surviving difficult events. The hatred and vitriol directed to her by strangers she had never met competed with her sorrow about the loss caused by her own memory lapse.

“They say the death of a child is one of the worst things you can experience — heaped on that is knowing you are responsible for the death of your child,” she said.

http://herald-zeitung.com/news/local_news/article_89d9f5a8-4aa9-11e0-8703-001cc4c03286.html

New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung