

Exclusive: Painful tragedy gives Cape Coral father purpose

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Reginald McKinnon pauses to steady his emotions recently while speaking about the death of his 1-year-old daughter, Payton, who died after McKinnon accidentally left her in the back seat of his hot car in Fort Myers. / Kin fay Moroti/news-press.com

Safety tips

KidsAndCars.org included the memory device, BE SAFE, on reminder cards they are making available for hospitals to send home with new parents.

Back seat. Put something like a cell phone in the back seat that requires you to open the back door when you park.

Every child should be correctly restrained in the back seat.

Stuffed animal. Keep a stuffed animal in your child's car seat. Place it on the front passenger seat as a reminder when your baby is in the back seat.

Ask your child care provider to call if your child hasn't arrived on time.

Focus on driving. Avoid calls and texting.

Every time you park make it a routine to open the back door of your car.

Source: KidsAndCars.org



Payton McKinnon / Special to news-press.com

The McKinnons seem to have everything: A spacious Cape Coral home scented with the fragrance of cinnamon, a solid 16-year marriage and steady jobs that put them squarely in the middle-class.

Now in their late 30s, Julia and Reginald McKinnon, who share a gentle demeanor, were high school sweethearts. She was the blonde cheerleader and he was a three-sport athlete. After college, they moved to Lee County and started a family after trying seven years to conceive.

The hardest question they get from people who don't know the grief that runs below their picture-perfect life is: How many children do you have?

There are days they say three. It's less painful. When they have the strength, they say four.

In March 2010, Payton, a 17-month-old with sapphire blue eyes the size of saucers, died. The toddler was full of smiles, a wiggler, who had learned to blow kisses.

"You just want to crawl in a hole like this is not really happening and wait for her to come back," said Julia McKinnon, a third-grade teacher.

The couple still grapples with questions like, "What if things went differently?"

For Reginald McKinnon, the grief is distinct. The memory of how his baby looked when he found her on that afternoon is seared in his mind. The vision rears suddenly, makes him flinch and keeps him up at night.

"Nothing can prepare you for finding your own child. It's crippling," Reginald McKinnon said.

He doesn't know if he'll ever forgive himself.

Fatal distractions

The unusual chill for Southwest Florida was on hiatus on Monday, March 8, 2010. The sun warmed the air to 73 degrees. The McKinnons and their daughters had enjoyed the weekend, taking in Everblades and Red Sox games. The girls had sported matching baseball jerseys.

Reginald had to make the switch to the early 6 a.m. shift at the downtown Fort Myers office of CenturyLink, where he is a supervisor.

Two hours later, he picked Payton up from day care for an appointment after her surgery to put tubes in her ears.

The doctor said she had healed, which made Reginald happy. He hated seeing her in pain. He clipped Payton into a rear-facing car seat in the center of the back seat of his Ford Explorer with tinted windows. There, she would be the safest.

Heading to downtown on McGregor Boulevard, his mind drifted to bills, home, his day at work. He pulled into the office parking lot around 11 a.m. For lunch, he walked to French Connection with another supervisor and showed off photos from the family's weekend. Around 3 p.m., he grabbed his laptop and headed to the car. He opened the door and saw Payton in the back, where he typically left his laptop to remind him the girls were in the car.

His heart stopped. He lost his breath. He knew she was gone. He clutched her to his chest and wept.

The rest was a blur. He remembers a colleague calling 911. He remembers the sound of sirens. He remembers making the hardest phone call of his life.

"She's gone Julie," he told his wife between sobs.

"What do you mean Reggie? You need to calm down," she told him.

He handed the phone to a police officer who said they would send someone to the Cape Coral school where she was finishing her day. The officer wouldn't say more. Finally, she reached her husband by phone again.

"She's gone. She's dead," he managed to say. Julia threw her phone and began to cry.

The biggest mistake

Reginald believes Payton may have died in an hour.

The temperature likely reached around 100 degrees inside the SUV, court records show.

Last year, Payton was the first child to die from hyperthermia, or heat stroke, in the country in what became a record year for the number of deaths after children were left in hot cars, according to KidsAndCars.org, a national child safety group. Forty-nine children died.

Two weeks ago, a 1-year-old boy died after being left in a car in Cape Coral.

In about half of the cases of kids who died in hot cars, research shows, a caregiver simply forgot.

"People think, 'They must be monsters,' " said Janette Fennell, president of KidsAndCars.org.

"But most of these parents are good parents. They are a minister, college professors, a dentist, a school vice principal and rabbinical students."

Reginald McKinnon's 60-year-old father-in-law, Jim Ringenberger, was one of those people who'd read about a child left in a car in and thought, how?

The biggest smear on McKinnon's record prior to this was a water usage violation. He and Julia are the kind of parents with locks on all the cabinets.

They would remind Ringenberger to rinse a dropped pacifier.

He knew it had to be an accident.

"This man is never without one of his children," Ringenberger said. "He worships those girls."

One of the biggest hurdles in building prevention around the issue, advocates say, is that people tune out. They assume they would never do that.

"Making the mistake that it could never happen to you is the biggest mistake you could make," Fennell said.

Competing systems

After Payton's death, Reginald searched for answers. Why? He had sleep studies and a cat scan. His brain was fine.

"I still don't think I'll ever fully understand why but from the stuff that I've studied and read, it really is a memory lapse and I know that that's hard for people to digest because it involves a child," he said.

Indeed, nearly everyone is capable of forgetting, said David Diamond, a University of South Florida psychology professor and a career scientist at the veterans' hospital in Tampa.

"Anyone who has a memory system that can fail, which is pretty much everyone, that means you're capable of forgetting a child," he said.

This is how Diamond explained it: Humans have competing brain systems.

The habit memory system that operates on a subconscious level can take over and suppress awareness a child is in the back seat, especially in times of stress and fatigue, he said.

(It's also why we might drive straight home from work even if a spouse has asked us to pick up milk.)

"When we're stressed or when we lose sleep, it is much more likely that the habit system controls our behavior," he said.

A consistent pattern he has noted in cases where drugs didn't play a role is a change in a routine of an already stressful life.

"We assume that we'll remember something that important," he said. "That assumption is false as long as we're not constantly thinking about it."

Angel in the garden

The night they lost Payton, Julia McKinnon sat in the chair where she had often rocked Payton to sleep crying, "I want my baby", her father recalls.

"What hurt me is to see them both hurting so desperately and not be able to do anything," Ringenberger said.

"There's nothing you can say, nothing you can buy, nothing you can do but sit and watch them dying inside."

The girls, Reginald and Julia have been in therapy.

They want to give their daughters happy lives while honoring Payton's memory. In January, baby Olivia was born. For months, they kept the pregnancy secret for fear people would think they were trying to replace Payton. "It wasn't planned," Reginald McKinnon said. "It was a blessing."

Julia McKinnon has never blamed her husband for Payton's death. She feels sad her husband bears a different pain.

"I knew that he would never hurt the children in any way," she said.

The hell of losing a child is something they wish no family would have to face.

They talk about Payton each day. Sometimes, the girls will cry and ask, Why did she have to go away? She only had two teeth.

One of Reginald's biggest fears is his daughters won't love him as they grow older and learn more details of that day.

"That's never going to happen," Julia tells him. "They're daddy's little girls."

In the family's Cape Coral backyard is a garden with an angel statue dedicated to Payton where Madison and Haley, now 5 and 4, have tea parties.

A butterfly will flutter through the yellow flowers and the girls point and say,

"There's Payton."

Community service

Clean-cut McKinnon sported a polo and khakis and looked the middle-class professional that he is on a recent evening before a handful of parents at the Children's Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida in Fort Myers. They were there for parenting classes.

"When your life's going crazy, you just need to slow down and make sure your child is your priority," he told the class of mostly mothers, some dabbing tears during his hour presentation.

Speaking to parents started as part of his community service sentence.

He pleaded guilty to a charge of leaving a child in a car and causing harm and is on five years probation. By November, he had completed the 20 hours yet still frequently speaks about the dangers of leaving a child in a car for any amount of time. It's his promise to Payton to try to prevent more children from dying.

He recommends people keep a reminder like a teddy bear they move to the passenger seat when the child is in the car seat. Each time he steps out of the car, he walks around to check the back seat. He began volunteering with Safe Kids USA, a nationwide network to prevent child injury and death. The family is a face of its Never Leave Your Child Alone in a Car campaign. Their story resonates, said Torine Creppy, executive director of Safe Kids' "Buckle Up" program.

"These are two wonderful, working parents that this happened to who never thought this could happen to them."

McKinnon plans to speak at local child care centers and Julia hopes to eventually join him.

Last week, the McKinnons met with other families who have lost children to heat stroke in cars at a roundtable organized by Safe Kids in Washington.

As he often does, he ended the talk at the local center with an invitation for questions, even the tough ones like, Will you ever forgive yourself?

"There's nothing that can happen to me that can be worse than March 8," he said. He realizes people still might say, How could he forget his child?

"You can go away from me and say all you want about me but at least you're talking about it."

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