

Small Group of Safety Advocates Change Auto Industry

February 28, 2012

It's not every day that we cover extraordinary success stories against the recalcitrant (to put it mildly) auto industry, and it's all thanks to a few relentless safety advocates. According to a front page article in today's New York Times, "Federal regulators plan to announce this week that automakers will be required to put rearview cameras in all passenger vehicles by 2014 to help drivers see what is behind them." This is because, reports the Times, On average, two children die and about 50 are injured every week when someone accidentally backs over them in a vehicle, according to KidsAndCars.org, a nonprofit group that pushed the government to begin tracking such tragedies. And more than two-thirds of the time, a parent or other close relative is behind the wheel. ... Backovers are the most common cause of off-road deaths involving children and vehicles, according to KidsAndCars. Said Janette Fennell, the founder of KidsAndCars.org, "We wouldn't buy a car if we couldn't see 30 or 40 feet going forward. We're taking this big lethal weapon going in reverse, and we can't see." By the way, that's the awesome Janette Fennell quoted here, who became a safety advocate after her own horrific experience described in this 1995 article. USA Today described her this way:

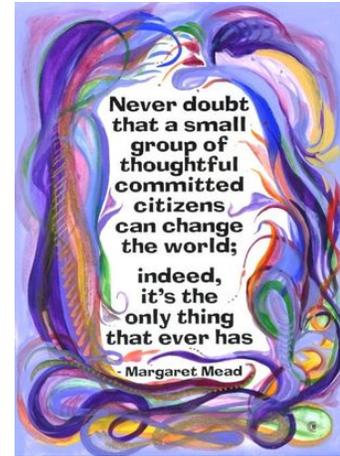
[S]he was carjacked, robbed, and left in a trunk with her husband. They escaped and their infant son was unharmed but Fennell wondered why few others were so lucky. That led to a successful four-year campaign to get emergency trunk releases required in cars, a feat considered remarkable both for its speed and her tenacity. Since then, Fennell has taken on a variety of other hazards facing children in and around cars, ranging from deaths and injuries due to heat, backovers and power windows. She's become an unabashed critic of the auto industry, an ally of safety czars including Ralph Nader and Joan Claybrook and a singleminded, if unrealistic, spokesmom for kids everywhere.

But that's not the only safety advocate success story this week. We've covered the unimaginably tragic case of Jacqueline Houck and her sister, Raechel, who died in a 2004 car crash because Enterprise failed to carry out a safety recall of the car they rented. It's truly a disturbing state of affairs, i.e., federal law prohibits manufacturers and dealers from selling recalled vehicles before they are fixed, but this law doesn't apply to rental car companies. And the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has no authority to force rental car recalls. So of course, rental car companies have been renting cars subject to safety recalls without fixing them first. But safety advocates, including Jacqueline and Raechel's mom, Cally, have been pushing for NHTSA oversight. (Read Cally's comment on our earlier coverage of this case.) And in an astonishing turnaround last week, Hertz struck an historic agreement with these safety advocates, asking Congress to put them under NHTSA oversight so they can be regulated! Writes USA Today, "that agreement adds momentum to an amendment with the same provisions backed by Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. The senators hope to include the amendment in a massive surface transportation bill that the Senate expects to address after it reconvenes Feb. 27." Notes Rosemary Shahan, president of the Sacramento-based Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety, "It's unprecedented for a major rental car company to actively support a new federal law that would require the industry to ground unsafe, recalled cars until they're fixed."

But it wasn't all good news. Enterprise (now the largest auto-rental company after buying National and Alamo), and Avis Budget, the third-largest, resisted joining Hertz - something Cally Houck clearly would not stand for. So she immediately began an online petition drive directed at Enterprise.

And sure enough, just days later, Enterprise said it would support federal legislation overseeing the way rental car companies manage the safety recall process. Writes the San Jose Mercury News, Roll Call, the newspaper that covers lobbying and influence on Capitol Hill, reported Monday on Houck's online petition, attributing Enterprise's change of heart to pressure from consumers. Bryant told Roll Call Enterprise has "not endorsed any specific legislation or amendment to date."

They'd better, or watch out for Cally Houck, who said, "We will prevail, with the help of all of us working to fix this consumer safety problem.... We made it this far. We are going all the way."



<http://www.thepoptort.com/2012/02/small-group-of-safety.html>