

# A family's ordinary morning turns tragic with baby's heat death

Child's heat death turns routine tasks into a painful lesson

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*Investigators work at a scene where a child was found dead in the mother's van when the mother went to pick the child up at the day care of Donelson Heights United Methodist Church on Fairway Drive on Tuesday, Aug. 7, 2012. / Samuel M. Simpkins / File / The Tennessean*

## Keeping kids safe in cars

- Never leave children alone in or around cars; not even for a minute.
- Put something you'll need, such as a cell phone, handbag or employee ID, on the floor board in the back seat so you'll have to check there.
- Keep a stuffed animal in the child's car seat when unoccupied. When the child is placed in the seat, put the stuffed animal in the front passenger seat as a visual reminder.
- Ask child care providers to call if your child doesn't show up when expected.
- If you see a child alone in a vehicle, get involved.

Source: [www.kidsandcars.org](http://www.kidsandcars.org)

DONELSON — People who know Stephanie and Aaron Gray say the couple put their four children at the center of their lives.

Now family, friends and Donelson neighbors are reeling from the death of 5-month-old Joel Gray, left unattended for five hours in the family minivan Tuesday as temperatures outside rose to 93 degrees.

"Everyone is just in total shock," said Metro Councilman Steve Glover, who attends church with the Grays. "I can't even imagine the tragedy they're feeling right now."

As details about the horrible discovery spread on Tuesday — including an image of the minivan — Glover was among those who gradually got a sick feeling as he realized he knew the family whose life had just changed forever.

"I shed several tears right there," he said. "I know how much she loves her kids."

It all unfolded within a one-mile radius of the family's home, where Stephanie Gray often worked out of the home, police said.

Gray, 39, is an attorney who specializes in military veterans' legal issues, according to the Tennessee Bar Association and her law practice website. Her husband works for a technology department within Metro government, records show.

Early Tuesday morning, the woman headed out on a pair of short drives.

Nashville police, who continue to investigate, say she began by taking two of her four children, ages 6 and 9, to their elementary school before its 8 a.m. start. That school, Stanford Montessori Design Center, is about one mile south of the home and just across the street from the day care center at Donelson Heights United Methodist Church, where she later intended to take her 5-month-old for his second day there.

She drove the short distance back home, over train tracks and past a pair of churches, to pick up the baby and her 11-year-old son and take him to Two Rivers Middle School, less than a mile north past another pair of churches. A long line of cars snaked around the circular driveway in front of the school.

Police say Stephanie Gray intended to continue to the day care center — a drive that would have required her to pass the street where the family lives, returning to the area of her first stop, the elementary school.

Instead, Gray turned toward home. She told authorities she didn't leave again until it was time to pick up the infant at 2:30 p.m.

She arrived, was told he had never been dropped off and only then realized he'd been in the van the whole time.

Police said Wednesday that during the woman's first trip, the 11-year-old and the infant were safe at home because relatives live right next door.

Aaron Gray's mother, Kay, former pastor of Donelson Heights United Methodist Church, lives in the adjacent house.

"They're just a very loving, close-knit family," Glover said. "I don't think anyone that knows them, or for that matter, anyone who doesn't know them, doesn't have a void in their hearts right now."

Sentiments such as Glover's have populated an online Facebook page for the Donelson community, where some neighbors have discussed displaying blue ribbons and raising money for the family.

For the moment, those plans are on hold, said Frank Tew, who oversees the online group.

“We want to make certain that, first and foremost, whatever is done is done in respect for the family and their privacy,” he said.

Leaders at the church said they, too, will help any way they can.

“As a church community, as a staff, our hearts are just broken for this family,” said Rick Quinn, director of Christian education. “We want to see what they need, and reach out with helpful intentions, but we don’t want to be in their way.”

Gray has not been charged.

But a Smyrna mother who police say left her two children in a car in a similar fatal incident last week, is scheduled to make her first court appearance today. Samantha Harper, 25, told investigators she put her two children, Daniel Marise, 3, and Savannah Marise, 2, in her car, went back inside her home and then fell asleep.

Five children have died inside hot cars in Tennessee this year, and 23 across the U.S.

Experts say parents who leave children to die in hot cars don’t fit a specific profile and that, when charged, few are convicted.

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[http://www.tennessean.com/article/20120809/NEWS01/308080173/A-family-s-ordinary-morning-turns-tragic-with-baby-s-heat-death?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.tennessean.com/article/20120809/NEWS01/308080173/A-family-s-ordinary-morning-turns-tragic-with-baby-s-heat-death?nclick_check=1)