

# With children left in hot cars, Sharyland filmmakers take on 'autopilot'

Posted: Sunday, September 1, 2013 6:53 pm by [ldefonso Ortiz](#) | The Monitor

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*Jacob Ramon, left, and Drake Alford, creators of the short film Autopilot, pose for a portrait Aug. 23, 2013, in McAllen. photo by Joel [Martinez/jmartinez@themonitor.com](mailto:JMartinez@themonitor.com)*

A young professional leaves the office for the day and steps into his car. It's 104 degrees inside as he turns on the air conditioning and sets off to pick up his baby daughter from day care. But he arrives at the daycare center only to find it closed, and it dawns on him: He'd never dropped her off. She'd been inside a hot car all day.

Young children left in hot cars is a story repeated in grim headlines each summer in the Rio Grande Valley, but in this case it's the plot of [a movie](#) whose filmmakers don't want to see those headlines anymore.

The short film [Autopilot](#) is the product of Sharyland High School students Jacob Ramon and Drake Alford. Ramon got the idea for the [film](#) after he read a story about a case of "autopilot" — when parents get caught up in daily tasks and forget that their children are strapped into the back seat — and was moved by it.

"It planted that seed," said Ramon, who along with Alford has begun submitting the film to festivals and hopes to use the project in the future as they pursue a career in the film industry. "And before we knew it, we were researching the topic and realized that this could really happen to anyone who gets caught up in a fast-paced daily activity and results in tragic consequences."

## RECENT CASES

One case took place Thursday afternoon at the parking lot of H-E-B at the intersection of Shary Road and Interstate 2/Expressway 83 in Mission, where Lorena Marilu Garza, 34, left her 18-month-old daughter in her SUV and went grocery shopping, court records show.

Mission police and firefighters broke into the vehicle and rushed the child — who was suffering from heat-related illness — to the hospital, where she was treated and eventually released to her father, said Mission police Cpl. Manuel Casas.

The mother was arrested and charged with child endangerment.

A review of surveillance tapes showed Garza had left the child in the vehicle for at least 58 minutes while she picked up groceries, court records show.

"People need to realize that if the temperature is over 100 out here, the temperature inside that car will reach 120, 130, 140 degrees in a matter of minutes," Casas said. "It's a miracle that this child was able to survive those temperatures for so long."

At almost the same time as the baby was rescued in Mission, Silvia Mar Garcia, 40, was arrested by Brownsville police after authorities rescued her 7-year-old and 14-month-old from a hot car. Garcia had left the children inside while she went to the WIC office in that city, municipal court records show. She was charged also with child endangerment.

## [KIDSANDCARS.ORG](#)

There is a particular set of circumstances under which a parent is most likely to leave a child in a vehicle, said Jeannette Fennel, founder of child safety advocacy group [KidsAndCars.org](#): The parent, already feeling the strain of everyday stresses, briefly deviates from a daily routine and becomes disoriented from the situation at hand. Fennel said her organization has spent years researching why a parent leaves a child behind. The reason Fennel has come across that most mirrors what Garza told Mission police when she came out of the store: a stressed-out parent had a blank moment.

"Initially upon hearing of these cases, the visceral reaction is that these parents are monsters," Fennel said. "What people don't understand is that we are human and this can happen to anyone.

This is why we have to reach out to the community so that we can retrain ourselves to always be aware," she said.

"Just the same way you check for your keys, your phone, your briefcase, take one second and check that backseat."

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