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## BUSINESS

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### Carjack Victim Succeeds in Fight For Safety Latches in Trunks

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Janette Fennell considered herself an ordinary homemaker until she and her husband were locked in the trunk of a Lexus sedan and left for dead.

The event turned her into a crusader who, largely on the strength of her protests, has pushed the auto industry into installing a safety feature long missing in cars—an internal emergency trunk release.

The absence of those devices cost at least 260 lives since 1970, said Fennell and her supporters. Nearly 40 of those victims were children younger than 14, most of whom accidentally were locked into vehicle trunks and who died what coroners described as agonizing deaths from heat stroke and suffocation.

Fennell feared that she and her husband, Greig, might die the same way.

That was in October 1995. "One hour and forty-five minutes of sheer terror," Fennell recalled. "I thought we were going to die."

Added to the terror was the uncertainty of what had happened to the Fennells' then 9-month-old son, Alexander. The bandits who hijacked the couple in front of their San Francisco home left Alexander sitting in the driveway in his car-safety seat.

The nightmare ended in a desperate act of

survival. The carjackers abandoned the Lexus and the trapped couple in a wooded area about 40 miles away from where they were snatched.

"I started ripping apart everything that I could get my hands on" inside the trunk, Fennell said. "It was hard to breathe. But I kept ripping and uncovered what appeared to be a cable and a latch. I pulled it. The trunk opened."

The escape was made sweeter by the discovery of Alexander where the villains had left him—safe and sitting in his seat in the driveway.

Fennell survived, but she was angry at what had happened to her, her husband, and little Alexander. And she was boiling mad at the auto industry.

That internal trunk release latch should have been easier to find, Fennell said.

She started doing research, calling car companies, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Society of Automotive Engineers. She learned that many cars did not have an internal trunk release, let alone one that was easy to find and operate.

There was no NHTSA standard requiring such a device. In fact, there were no NHTSA records on incidences and consequences of trunk entrapment, forced or accidental.

Fennell, a former marketing executive who left office life to rear children at home, launched a



FILE PHOTO/BY BILL STAHL JR.—ASSOCIATED PRESS

Janette Fennell shows her campaign results: a trunk release lever in a 2000 model year Ford Taurus at the spring New York Auto Show.

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# Victim Crusades for Trunk Safety

TRUNKS, *From E1*

campaign, the Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition. Initially, she was not taken seriously. An understandable neurotic, critics scoff. A woman using the public to seek closure on a horrible event. She persisted, gaining some early attention from Ford Motor Co., which grew into a groundswell of support during a summer of tragedy.

In the summer of 1998, 11 children in three separate incidents inadvertently were trapped in the trunks of motor vehicles. All of them were younger than 6—and all died from heat stroke or suffocation.

Ford's early response to Fennell became a commitment. "We knew we had to do something," Ford spokesman Mike Moran said. "We didn't need a regulation. It was just the right thing to do."

Ford this year began installing a glow-handle and cable internal trunk releases as standard equipment in its new cars. By 2001, the devices, designed to be operated by a child, will be installed in all new Ford cars "at no extra cost to the consumer," Moran said.

General Motors Corp., working with the National Safe Kids Campaign, a Washington-based group dedicated to reducing childhood deaths and injuries, also volunteered to begin installing internal trunk releases in its new cars. But the GM device is passive, meaning that it requires no action by the trapped person.

"Our behavioral research showed" that some children won't pull a latch, or try to escape, if they are entrapped in trunks," said Gary White, GM's vehicle line executive for

the company's mainstream cars, the Chevrolet Impala and Monte Carlo.

So, GM designed an electronic system that senses both body movement and temperature, and will open the trunk automatically if it detects a temperature differential, such as heat generated by mammals.

GM's patented Automatic Trunk Detection and Opener System is active only when the car's transmission is in "park." The system will go into production in early 2000, and will be available on all new GM cars as standard equipment by model year 2002.

As a backup, GM's automatic thermal imaging device will be accompanied by a manual internal trunk release.

DaimlerChrysler AG, maker of Mercedes-Benz, Chrysler, Plymouth and Dodge cars and trucks, also is installing internal trunk releases in its vehicles.

Is this an overreaction to somebody's bad luck?

Fennell responds strongly to the question.

"People think these things don't happen; and they think that because nobody has bothered to do any research to look at how often it happens. Well, I've done the research," she said. So did National Safe Kids.

The two groups recently presented their findings at a meeting of the NHTSA-appointed, ad hoc Expert Panel on Trunk Entrapment. They reported that since 1970, an estimated 1,175 people have been victims of trunk entrapment in 992 separate incidents.

An estimated 75 percent of those incidents involved forced entrapments of people who were deliberately locked in trunks during the commission of a crime.

## Safeguards for Children

Forced trunk entrapments usually are out of the victim's control. Faced with a choice of being shot or locked in a trunk, most victims usually choose the trunk in hopes of eventual escape, according to law enforcement and auto safety experts.

But accidental entrapments, which mostly involve children, are quite another matter, said Heather Paul, chairman of the National Safe Kids Campaign. Those tragedies frequently stem from parental inattention, or failure to observe basic safety rules, she said.

"A motor vehicle is not an acceptable play area for a child," she said. "On a hot day, when trunk temperatures can exceed 140 degrees, children can die or suffer permanent injury within 20 minutes after becoming entrapped in [a car] trunk."

Children should not be allowed to play near a car, she said.

Auto key storage also is important, Paul said. Bright and noisy keys appeal to children. So do battery-operated, remote control keys that seem to magically open a car door or trunk lid at the push of a button.

In the wrong hands, those keys can lead to an open-and-shut case of heartbreak, Paul said. "Car keys should be kept in a safe place, inaccessible to children," she said.

—Warren Brown