

Filling in the gaps: First hot car deaths of 2012 spark call to action

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Photo courtesy Ray Ray's Pledge – Brett and Kristie Cavaliero, whose daughter, Ray, died last year of hyperthermia, now work with parents and daycares to raise awareness and help prevent hot car child deaths.

The month of May has been a tough one for Brett and Kristie Cavaliero. Last year, the Austin couple lost their daughter on May 25, just 10 days after her first birthday.

Ray died of hyperthermia that morning after being left in the car for more than three hours. According to the Cavalieros, Ray dozed off to sleep in the car and, for reasons they do not know or understand, Brett drove past the turn that he would normally take to drop her off at daycare and went straight

to work.

With the first two hot car child deaths of the year reported last Thursday -- one in Lee's Summit, Mo. and the other in Sugar Land, Texas -- the Cavalieros are working with parents, communities and daycares across the country to make sure a child's location never goes unknown.

"Both of these cases, just like ours, involved the children being forgotten in the backseat instead of being dropped off at daycare, with the childrens' whereabouts going unquestioned by the daycare," Kristie said. "Note that in no way are we placing blame on daycares, we just see a huge safety gap in awareness that the morning drop-off time is a very dangerous [and] potentially lethal time for an infant or toddler."

A total of 33 hyperthermia deaths of children in vehicles were reported last year in the United States, according to the Department of Geosciences at San Francisco State University, eight of which occurred in Texas. The record number of these deaths occurred in 2010, with 12 of the 49 cases reported in Texas.

That doesn't even include the hundreds of near misses that have occurred requiring EMS intervention, Kristie said.

"We know we underestimate because reports are based on news article searches," she said. "[However] Texas leads the nation in hot car deaths overall and yearly."

Because more than one in five children who die of vehicular heatstroke were supposed to go to daycare that morning, Kristie said, this statistic is more than a coincidence. To counter it, the Cavalieros are calling on parents and daycare facilities to enter communication agreements between one another, requiring better communication between the two.

"Our hope is to engage daycares in the awareness piece so that hopefully one day there will be as many safety measures surrounding the morning drop-off time at daycare as there are for evening pick-up measures," Kristie said. "Our goal with the pledge is to help fill this safety gap, noting that the first and primary responsibility is on the parent, who agrees to call every time a child will be late or absent."

Although Plano has not had a case of hot car child deaths in years, several have been reported around the Metroplex in the past few years, said Capt. Peggy Harrell, fire safety education coordinator for the Plano Fire Department. Harrell met Kristie at a Safe Kids conference last November and was moved by the Cavaliero's courage in sharing their loss with the public, and disseminates their educational materials at health fairs, new mothers groups and anywhere she sees an opportunity to spread awareness on the issue.

While many are quick to judge when news of these deaths surface, Harrell said many of the parents responsible were not neglectful at all, but perhaps simply thrown off by a kink in their regular routine. It is

important to delineate between the forgotten child and one who is knowingly left in the car, she said.

"Rightfully they make news, and rightfully there is public outcry about those," Harrell said. "We have to remember that we are human. They are not negligent parents, these are just tragic accidents. People who think, 'it won't happen to me,' or, 'just this one time,' they're kidding themselves."

With another hot Texas summer on the horizon, Harrell said it is important for parents and caregivers to be mindful when transporting small children. Simple habits such as placing valuables like cell phones, purses or brief cases in the backseat can prompt a trip to the backseat when leaving the vehicle. Putting a stuffed animal in the carseat when it is empty, and placing it in the passenger seat when the child is riding in it, can also serve as a reminder, Harrell said.

Passersby should also be vigilant in reporting signs of endangerment when out in public, as well. Above all, no child should be left unattended in a vehicle for any period of time.

"We get it all the time when people see a dog in the car, and we get dispatched out to vehicles with animals in them occasionally," she said. "Call on babies, too; don't worry about what the reaction is going to be."

Since founding Ray Ray's Pledge after their daughter's death, the Cavalieros have used their nonprofit organization to spread awareness from Arizona to Connecticut, using a handful of volunteers including Ray's former teachers, family and neighbors, on what Kristie called a "shoestring budget."

The Cavalieros continue to work aggressively through their website, www.rayrayspledge.com, and other social media outlets and with one-on-one meetings with parents, community groups, medical professionals and daycare directors to get the word out.

"In most cases the daycares have been very receptive and completely on-board, especially the teachers," Kristie said. "We have had only a few rare cases where the daycare owners and administrators did not support the program out of fear of being sued; fortunately in this case, the parental awareness and demand for the product actually resulted in a change of course from the administrators."

The Cavalieros are also active supporters of a public awareness campaign to notify the public of the first "National Heat Awareness Day" on May 25, which coincidentally is the date of their daughter's death.

"We have provided a number of awareness stories for the media in hopes of keeping this issue at the forefront of parents' and caregivers' minds, even if they think it could never happen to them," Cavaliero said. "We never ever imagined this risk to our daughter until after it happened to us."

Ray Ray's Pledge also recently formed a partnership with Suddenly Safe 'N Secure Systems, Inc, which markets several versions of child carseat, location and anti-drowning alarm systems online. However, Kristie said, none of the solutions the Cavalieros pose through their organization should serve as substitutes for appropriate parental supervision, but should be seen as safety nets in the highest times of danger.

As they prepare to host a birthday remembrance ceremony for close friends and family of Ray Ray on May 15, where they will have a balloon release ceremony at sunset, the Cavalieros -- who are expecting twins at the end of the summer -- said they miss their "soul mate" every minute of every day.

"Nothing is foolproof, but the reality is that parents are human and even the best parent can make a lethal error, so we need all the help we can get," Kristie said.

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