

Abigail's legacy: Pelham mom gets backup camera legislation passed 4 years after daughter's death

By [Martin J. Reed](#) | mreed@al.com | [Follow on Twitter](#) on May 11, 2014 at 10:00 AM, updated May 11, 2014 at 2:48 PM



Taken about a year ago with the portrait of Abigail Hope, the Dahlen family of Pelham includes Gracie, Eli, father Michael, Samuel, mother Brandy, Nathan, Anna Faith holding Mila and Malachi. (Courtesy / Dahlen family)

It started out as any other day for mother Brandy Dahlen and her family. Then it was anything but.

Daughter Abigail Hope Dahlen had turned 2 just two days earlier. She was playing ball with her brother Samuel and sister Anna Faith in the yard of their Helena home.

"She chased the ball into his driveway right at the time he was backing up," the mother recalled about her neighbor. The driver was unable to see the girl.

A short time later, little Abigail died in the hospital -- and a lifelong cause and quest had begun.

Parents Brandy and Michael Dahlen quickly became advocates for national legislation requiring backup cameras in vehicles.

"It was our decision immediately that we would do whatever we could do to tell her story and honor her," the mother said.

Brandy Dahlen poses in front of the family's home in Pelham on Thursday, May 8, 2014, with her children including, in the top row, Samuel, Gracie and Nathan, and, in the bottom row, Eli, Malachi and Anna Faith. Husband and father Michael Dahlen is not pictured. (Martin J. Reed / mreed@al.com) [SHELBY COUNTY, Alabama](#) -- April 11, 2010.



'Victory'

With the four-year anniversary of Abigail's death nearing, the Dahlens received some welcome news last month.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration ruled automakers would be required to place rearview cameras on all new vehicles sold in the United States starting in May 2018.

"Relief," said Brandy Dahlen, who now lives with her family in Pelham. "And the timing was -- it was April 1. We were looking at our four-year anniversary on the 11th. It was good timing. Relief. Victory. That's what I felt like."

Their message has been heard nationally, and the nonprofit safety organization KidsAndCars.org this month named Brandy Dahlen an "Exceptional Mother of Inspiration" for her relentless efforts toward educating parents and others on legislation in support of backup cameras in vehicles.

"After a crippling trauma, she has volunteered her time and energy to help other families prevent or deal with the devastation of similar tragedies," said KidsAndCars.org president and founder Janette Fennell. "Although nothing will bring back her child or heal her wounds, she continues her volunteer efforts to keep America's children safe."

Less than a year after Abigail's death, the Dahlens testified before the U.S. Department of Transportation about rear-visibility legislation for vehicles. The next time the family traveled to the nation's capital to speak to lawmakers and hold a press conference was on the third anniversary of Abigail's death.

Brandy Dahlen pushed for rearview cameras offering 180-degree views, not just 120 degrees.

"We were asking for effective legislation -- not a weak standard, but a standard that was going to save lives," she said. Any delay in the federal requirement will mean lives lost, said Brandy Dahlen, who has seven other children. She noted that 50 kids die across the nation each year from back-over accidents.

"It's just that many more lives," she said.

'Less and less safe'

Brandy Dahlen tries to open eyes of parents and others to the dangers, setting up information tables to promote vehicle safety at Kingwood Christian School in Alabaster and Covenant Classical School sites in the area.

"I think people are so unaware of how large their blindside is, and how cars have been engineered to keep people inside the car safe, and as they do that people outside the car are less and less safe," she said. "People think they can see with their mirrors. You can fit more than 60 children behind a car and not see one of them with a mirror."

The Dahlens' oldest child, 16-year-old Nathan, has taken on the campaign, too.

For his Eagle Scout project, he wanted to pay tribute to Abigail's legacy.

"My sister had been run over a few years before, and I really just wanted to give the community something you can take away, and that is experience," he said.

With his mother's help, Nathan organized a vehicle safety day on March 16, 2013, at the Pelham YMCA that featured several informational booths. A demonstration showed visitors that a truck's rear blind zone is about 50 feet long by 8 feet wide.

"The goal was really, at the very minimum, to save one life, and if I get that one life saved, my goal has been reached and every life after that is just a bonus," Nathan said.

Moving forward

Even with the federal requirement coming in 2018, Brandy Dahlen continues to preach her message.

She still visits schools to promote her safety campaign.

She's had a rearview camera installed in Nathan's 1986 Monte Carlo, too; she said it cost "about \$30."

"We won't let him drive without it," she said.

On a recent day, the sounds of youthful laughter came from her yard as the Dahlens' children Anna Faith, 10; Samuel, 9; Eli, 4; and adopted kids Gracie and Malachi, both 6, and from the Ukraine, played. The Dahlens also have 1-year-old Mila.

"It's an honor," Brandy Dahlen said about the exceptional mother recognition. "But mostly I think I feel it's just another part of Abigail's legacy, because anything I have done is not for my sake. It's to tell her story and to help other people. It's one way to continue to recognize her and to continue that mission."

http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2014/05/this_mothers_day_vehicle_safet.html#incart_river_default