

Reader's Digest

HEROES FOR TODAY®

A COMPILATION



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Released—Janette Fennell fights for a way out.

Escaped Crusader

JANETTE AND GREIG FENNEL had just returned to their San Francisco home one night in 1995 when two gunmen suddenly slipped under the garage door as it was closing. The men locked the couple in the car trunk, placed their nine-month-old son—still strapped in his car seat—on the garage floor, and sped off with their captives. An hour later the thieves opened the trunk, robbed Janette, 45, and Greig, 50, of

their money and jewelry, shut the trunk again and fled.

Locked in the dark, the couple frantically tore up the carpeting, hoping to find something that would open the trunk. Finally they located the release cable and popped the lid.

Soon after that terrifying incident, Janette founded TRUNC (Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition), a small group of volunteers who urge legislators and auto executives to install inside-trunk escape latches. In

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response to their plea, officials cited a 1984 decision concluding there was only a “remote” chance of an emergency release ever being needed. To disprove their claims, Janette documented 1052 cases of trunk lock-ins over the past 20 years, resulting in 237 deaths. Suddenly, she says, TRUNC had appointments with Congressmen interested in examining the issue. An unwelcome boost for her cause came in the summer of 1998, when 11 children perished in three accidental lock-ins.

To prevent future tragedies, a panel convened by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has recommended that new cars be equipped with internal trunk releases by January 2001. Some U.S. auto manufacturers are making them standard in year 2000 models. GM's Chevrolet Impalas will feature a heat-and-motion sensor that automatically opens the trunk if it detects someone inside. Most manufacturers will also retrofit older models with releases.

“Those 11 kids would be alive if someone had taken this seriously,” Janette says. “My job is to be the voice for the people who couldn't get out.”

— ERIK MEERS, MEGAN MCCASLIN and
MACON MOREHOUSE in *People Weekly*