

SHE MADE AN INDUSTRY LISTEN

Janette E. Fennell, 54, is president of Kids and Cars (www.kidsandcars.org), a Leawood, Kansas, nonprofit advocating child and automobile safety. She founded the group after surviving a kidnapping during which she and her husband, Greig, a corporate business-continuity director, were locked in their car's trunk.

It was Halloween weekend, but I knew instantly that the masked men who ducked under our garage door as it closed behind us were not trick-or-treaters. They ordered us at gunpoint into the trunk of our car, got behind the wheel and took off.

Our 9-month-old son, Alexander, had been asleep in his car seat. I thought we were all going to die. The men finally stopped, opened the trunk, told us to hand over our jewelry and wallets, slammed the trunk shut with us in it and left. Suddenly, in the dark trunk, I saw a little light shining on a piece of metal. I told my husband I thought I'd found the trunk release. Greig realized he could tug on the cable attached to the release, pop the trunk open and free us. To my horror the baby was gone. We soon learned that a police officer had found Alexan-

der alone on our lawn, where the robbers had put him. We were lucky to be alive because we could have suffocated, another officer later told me.

His words haunted me. I made hundreds of calls to officials and found that no government agency collected data on car-trunk incidents because most occur on private property, not public roads. I consulted several sources, including newspaper stories and police reports, and estimated that more than 2,000 crime victims, as well as children playing hide-and-seek, had gotten locked in car trunks in the previous three decades; it appeared that at least 300 of them had died. Naïvely, I thought, "Wait till the car companies hear about this! They'll install internal trunk releases right away!" But the auto industry responded with form letters. Incidents and fatalities continued. I want to believe people care about one another, so I kept talking to anyone who would listen.

Eventually, I began to meet lawmakers. I also started the first national database of trunk incidents; as a result of this work, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA] invited me to join a panel to study the issue. Following our panel's recommendation, NHTSA mandated glow-in-the-dark releases on new cars starting in 2002. We don't know of one fatality in car trunks with the new release.

I had no plans to move on to other issues. Hey, we'd fulfilled our goal. Then I noticed a huge increase in accidents involving cars mistakenly backing over children owing to the blind zone that can be found behind most vehicles. Why does it take a mom from Kansas to figure out that you should be able to see where you're going when you're driving backward?

Again, no one in the industry listened, but this time I knew what to do. I contacted Senators Hillary Clinton (D.-N.Y.) and John Sununu (R.-N.H.), who in 2005 agreed to cosponsor a bill advocating rear-visibility standards. I was jubilant when the President signed the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act of 2007, named after a 2-year-old killed when he wandered behind the family SUV.

My boys think I'm a safety nut. Alexander is 13 now and Noah is 10. Noah asks, "Mom, will I ever get out of this car seat?"

I want to believe people care about each other

—JANETTE E. FENNEL

