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Relatives are often at the wheel when kids are killed

AP Associated Press
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[RICHARDSON, Texas](#) — It was Adrianna’s day to go shopping at the mall, and her mom was looking forward to it. Mother and daughter alone together.

Just three weeks before, Rachel Clemens’ own mother had died after a long illness and in the past week she’d organized her son Andrew’s seventh birthday party. She and her husband, David, had taken Adrianna and Andrew bowling with his friends and a couple of them had spent the night.

The next day, Oct. 9, 2004, a Saturday, would be Adrianna’s day, although for this family it would forever be linked with tragedy.

David had made breakfast for everyone and cleaned up while Rachel and 2-year-old Adrianna took a bath.

“I was blow-drying my hair,” Rachel recalls. “I flipped my hair over. I looked up and she wasn’t there.” Adrianna probably went upstairs to see her brother and his friends, she thought.

Then she heard David’s screams.

He had told her he was going to move their SUV so he could get into a storage area above the garage ceiling to retrieve some decorations for Halloween.

“Adrianna must have come out of the kitchen and out to the garage,” she says. “And he backed out.”

Little Adrianna was hit by a 2½-ton mass of steel.

Their precious little girl, whose raven hair and dark eyes resembled her mother’s, was gone. She was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Adrianna was one of more than 1,200 children under 15 who were killed since 2000 in nontraffic motor vehicle accidents in the United States. Half of those fatalities were in backovers, almost all of them involving children under 5, according to Kids and Cars, a child safety advocacy group in Leawood, Kan.

Each week, at least two children are killed and another 50 are hurt in backover accidents. Over three days in April, six children were killed; by the end of the month, 11 more died, the group said.

Rear cameras and audible warning sensors, technology that could reduce the number of fatalities, are not considered safety equipment by automakers and are offered only as optional parking aids in most vehicles. It could be years before they become as ubiquitous as seat belts.

Grief compounded

“Everybody says the worst thing that could ever happen is the death of a child,” says Janette Fennell, the advocacy group’s founder and president. “What’s different in these, in over 70 percent of the cases, it’s a direct relative of the child that’s behind the wheel — mom or dad, grandma or grandpa, aunt or uncle.”

Losing a child, compounded by unimaginable guilt over who was responsible for the accident, leaves families traumatized and immobilized in their grief. With no easy answers for why it happened to their child or their family, anger and blame often are misdirected. The strain on relationships can be tremendous.

Rachel and David believed they’d taken all the precautions to protect their children. They had installed a fence around the backyard swimming pool, with a gate latch high enough so the kids couldn’t reach it. But when they purchased their Infiniti QX4, they were coaxed into getting a sunroof. No mention was made of rear cameras that could help them see better as they back up, Rachel says.

“My husband and I were comatose for months” after Adrianna died, Rachel says, and she still appears broken and frail, seated in an overstuffed chair in the den of their suburban Dallas home.

On the beige walls of the converted bedroom she calls her “safety haven” are family snapshots and studio photos of Adrianna, one depicting her as an angel.

“I have to have her all around me,” Rachel says. “I feel her with me when I’m in here. I feel her closeness.”



Rachel Clemens poses with a photograph of her daughter, Adrianna, at her home in Richardson, Texas. Adrianna was backed over and killed in Oct. 2004.

Donna McWilliam / AP

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She hung poster-size images of Adrianna on one wall but David couldn't bear to look at them so Rachel put them away.

David still won't speak publicly about that day. Two-and-a-half years later, his anguish is still too raw.

"You have a name on you now and it's a horrible feeling," Rachel says. "We're not just the Clemenses. We're 'the ones.' My husband, it took him years before he could even walk down the street. You just feel like everybody looks at you, pointing to you.

"It's not that they don't want to talk to us. They don't know what to say," she says. "As a grieving parent, my advice is not say anything, just let us talk. That's the best comfort you can give us."

Adrianna and Andrew already were the best of friends, two peas in a pod, their mother called them, yet strikingly different personalities. Andrew is the sensitive one, "more protector than anything else," Rachel says. Adrianna was outgoing, fearless.

"Nothing would get by her," Rachel says. "She'd let you know. She'd defend Andrew in front of his friends and Andrew's friends would cry because Adrianna would yell at them."

'Bye-bye syndrome'

"How could it happen?" Rachel asks, but she finds little comfort in any explanation.

Fennell calls it "bye-bye syndrome." A parent says they're running out briefly. The child hears "bye-bye" and decides, "I want to go bye-bye, too."

"They sneak out. They can see the car. ... They have no idea they're putting themselves in harm's way," Fennell says.

It's been almost five years, and Greg Gulbransen has begun to forgive himself for his very human mistake.

A pediatrician from Syosset, N.Y., Greg believes he and his wife, Leslie, did all the right things. They childproofed their Long Island home and researched the safest SUV for their two sons, Scott, 5, and 2-year-old Cameron, before settling on a BMW X5.

One evening, Oct. 19, 2002, Greg went out to park the truck with the rear facing their condominium. Street traffic could be heavy in the morning when he left for work.

"I remember explicitly driving that car from the street into the driveway that night," he says. "I was backing it in between parked cars on the driveway. I was going very slowly. I didn't want to hit anything. I was looking through the rearview mirrors, looking over my shoulder.

"I felt a bump. The bump was at the front wheel. I was going backward. What was down there — 9:30 at night? The newspaper wasn't there yet. As the car went back farther, my son was in the headlights."

It was Cameron.

"He opened and closed the door for the first and last time in his life," his father says. "I administered CPR in the driveway. I had my stethoscope in my hand. He was bleeding through his nose, through his ears. He died on the driveway. They tell me he died in the hospital.

"I know he died in my arms."

Greg says he was "numb" for a year.

"When people realize a conservative, well-educated, middle-aged pediatrician taking all the necessary safety measures, who spends his days and nights helping families stay safe and healthy, accidentally backs over and kills his son, then it's time to realize backover injuries are real," he says.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in a report to Congress in November, said backover accidents are not a recent phenomenon. But NHTSA disputes perceptions that the number of accidents is increasing as the size of the nation's vehicle fleet grows — led by SUVs and minivans, which tend to have larger rear blind zones.

A study by Consumer Reports magazine suggests SUVs, pickups and minivans are longer and taller and their blind zones extend as much as 50 feet from the rear bumper. These factors contribute to poor visibility, the report says.

An underestimated problem

Recording reliable statistics of accidents often depends on whether they occurred on a public roadway — where they are counted by a government agency — or private property like a driveway, where they are not.

So no one really knows for sure if the trend is up or down.

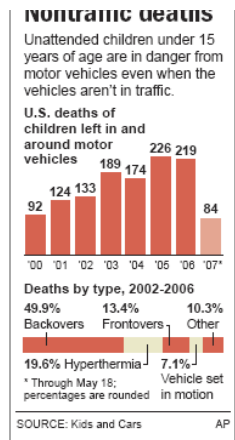
And while NHTSA cites groups like Kids and Cars for raising awareness of backover fatalities, it concedes that any statistics collected "very likely underestimate the true extent of the backover crash problem."

What's clear is that from 1991 through 2004, federal figures show an average of 76 backover fatalities annually on public roads, almost three-fourths of them involving passenger cars, pickups and SUVs. The report said most of the dead were children under 5.

Fennell's database shows backovers claimed 104 lives in 2005 and again in 2006.

\$100 to save a life

Devices like audible warning sensors or rear cameras are standard in some luxury brands and only about 100 vehicle models. Warning sensors



can add \$100 to a vehicle's price, a camera system about \$300 — still cheaper than aftermarket cameras and sensors, which range from \$150 to over \$1,000.

“Our government, and rightfully so, has put a lot of focus on belts and air bags, and if you do all those right things and are unfortunate to get in a crash, you might be able to walk away,” Fennell says. “But they’ve totally ignored the fact that at 1 mph, the interaction of a child and vehicle is lethal.”

Greg and Leslie Gulbransen sought therapy before deciding to confront the tragedy in their own way.

“I didn’t blame Greg. I feel sad for him that he has to live with this the rest of his life,” Leslie, a private school teacher, said in an e-mail. “Believe me, this isn’t easy for him or any of us, but it is a part of our lives and we have to deal with it.”

Greg still drives a BMW like the one he drove the night Cameron was killed, but his new model is equipped with a rear camera. The Clemenses replaced their Infiniti SUV and also equipped their new vehicle with a rear camera.

“When I got the camera installed, I cried and cried,” Rachel says. “My gosh, the technology was there. It’s not like we’re asking the auto industry to invent it.”

Supporters of Kids and Cars are prodding the government, in Cameron’s name, to require automakers to expand the field of view for drivers and create a database to track backover accidents. If the Cameron Gulbransen Child Auto Safety Act is approved by Congress, the Department of Transportation would draw up rules and carmakers would have up to four years to comply.

“Safety really is our priority,” said Wade Newton, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, an industry trade group that represents nine top automakers. But any safety device is of little value without parental supervision, he said.

A new direction

The Gulbransens have a new addition to their family, a delightful little girl named Julia, who’s now 3.

“I sometimes look at her and cry and smile at the same time, realizing how lucky I am to have her and how sad I am to have lost Cameron,” Leslie says.

But the tragedy refocused their appreciation for the wonderful life they have. Scott is a happy, well-adjusted 10-year-old, and Greg has a renewed purpose. He’s been to Capitol Hill at least five times in recent years to push for passage of Cameron’s bill, most recently in February.

“I love where I am in life. I just hate how I got here,” he says. “This was hell.”

Rachel and David Clemens are still crawling out of their private hell. They’re in therapy with their son, Andrew, now 9.

Rachel was troubled by her fading memories of Adrianna that first year.

“(Then) slowly, with time, you start remembering,” she says. “Now, one little memory, it’s so hard to digest. Even if it’s a great memory, it’s so painful.”

For Andrew, Adrianna’s death just three weeks after their grandmother’s passing raised all kinds of concerns. “He’s thinking: My gosh, am I next?” his mother says.

As she speaks, Andrew strolls in, cuddles up next to her and plants a kiss on her cheek. Then he leaves to join his dad for an egg salad lunch.

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