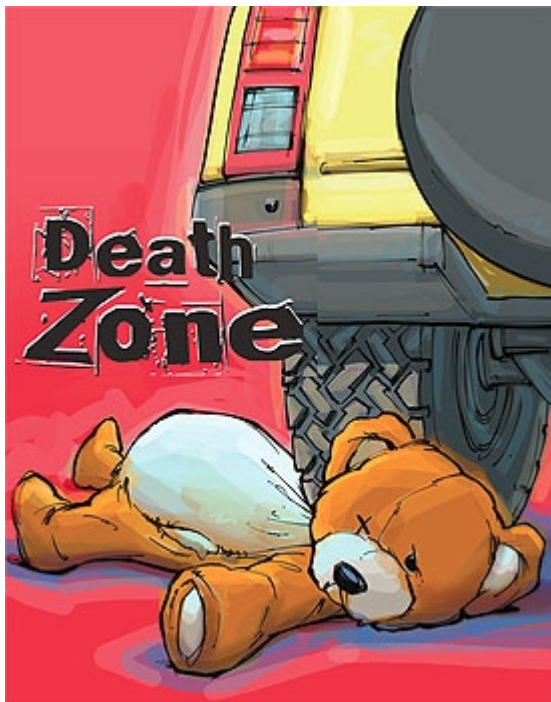


THE SCOTTSDALE TIMES

Award-Winning Features

Last year 10 Arizona children were crushed in their own driveways, several by their own unknowing parents. If you think it could never happen to you, neither did the subjects of this story. Meet the fastest-growing killer of Arizona children.

- John Dickerson



"My son was the first one to scream.

"My husband was pitching the tent. I was unloading the truck. Then it seemed like, in seconds, hundreds of people were screaming. It literally was echoing in the mountains.

"The screams were so horrible, so terrifying that I thought there was an animal attacking. I looked, and all I saw was a blur of people in chaos. I thought to run away, and then I thought, my kids, so I ran into it.

"I immediately thought a bear or something. I thought someone was getting mauled. Where are my children?

"I ran into it. Because of all the screaming and chaos I couldn't see straight, until I saw my husband, on his knees, pounding on his head. I immediately looked to see what he was looking at. He was looking at my mom, with my baby dangling from her arms. I snatched him from her arms. My mom was covered in blood."

Yadira Rodriguez, 31, is sitting in her Phoenix home, describing the death of her youngest son. Sixteen-month-old Romeo Rodriguez was not attacked by a wild animal. He was run over while his great aunt parked her truck at a campground. He was just one of 10 Arizona children who were killed in driveway or parking accidents in 2006.

According to Times research and the most recent Arizona Child Fatality Review Team Report, last year more Arizona children died under the wheels of vehicles while they were being parked than from fires, burns and poisonings combined. Most were run over by their parents, in their own driveways. Nine of the 10 killed were under age six, and all 10 were run over by trucks or SUVs.

"In 70 percent of the cases it's a parent or a direct relative who's behind the wheel," says Janette Fennelle, founder and president of Kids and Cars. Fennelle has been studying non-collision vehicle fatalities for more than a decade and says driveway deaths have increased sharply with the popularity of SUVs, which have much larger blind spots, making drivers unable to see small children in rearview mirrors.

Fennelle has called The Times today to report another backover death, Arizona's first in 2007. "People don't even know about one of the major killers of kids in their area," Fennelle says of Arizona parents. "For children three and under, this may end up being the number one cause of death. We'll know after the first year of federal monitoring.

"These people who love and adore their child more than anything on earth are responsible for killing them. It's ripping apart families and devastating communities," Fennelle adds.

According to a recent Center for Disease Control study, About 2,600 children are backed over each year in the U.S. On average, about 100 of those die as a result of their injuries. Last year, Arizona was responsible for one in every 10 reported driveway deaths in the U.S.

"Here locally we have almost one death every month," Rodriguez says, adding that she had never heard of driveway deaths when Romeo was killed during the family camping trip. At Romeo's funeral she learned that a boy buried just two plots away died in the same tragic manner. Rodriguez then began noticing almost one driveway death occurring every month in the Valley. Unfortunately, the media had failed to make a correlation with the larger trend until now.

At least three factors regularly contribute to driveway deaths in Arizona: Many families don't know about the often-fatal danger of moving a vehicle in their driveway; some families believe the tragedy could never happen to them; and more families than ever are driving SUVs, trucks and vans with larger blind spots.

The Fatal Perfect Storm

May 29, 2005: Romeo Rodriguez was running and playing with his three older brothers at Oak Creek campground in Sedona. Romeo was not yet two years old, but in size and smarts, he acted more like a three-year-old.

The Rodriguez's aunts, uncles and cousins were camping on Memorial Day weekend. For the adults, it was a well-deserved break from operating the family's three salons and day spas in Phoenix. For the children, it was a chance to play hide-and-seek, roast marshmallows and sleep outdoors.

Yadira Rodriguez says the biggest misconception among Arizona parents is that these tragedies only happen to bad parents. "I thought I was that mom who took every precaution," she says.

Five days a week Rodriguez drove her sons to a private school. "I was that mom who loaded the kids in the car to drive them away to the park so they wouldn't play near the streets," she says.

When buying a wagon for a trip to Disneyland, Rodriguez searched relentlessly for one with seatbelts. "I thought I did everything. I never, ever thought there was a chance my kids could have been in danger," she says. "It took seconds; that's where the guilt has set in for me and my husband."

As cautious as they were, the Rodriguez family had never heard of backover or driveway deaths, and the danger came in a place where they least expected, a family celebration.

As the Rodriguez family scattered to set up camp in Sedona, Romeo ran to play with his elementary-aged brothers and cousins. About the same time, Romeo's great aunt, one of his regular babysitters and herself a mother of four, opened the door of her Chevrolet Silverado pickup, planning to reposition the vehicle.

From about 15 feet away, Romeo's older brother saw him run toward the front bumper of the silver truck. The starting engine startled Romeo, who wobbled and fell over in front of the truck. Like most driveway deaths, Romeo's great aunt never saw him. It was physically impossible with him so close to the bumper.

One study has since shown that a five-foot-two woman at the wheel of a similar truck cannot see the ground for 14 feet in front of the vehicle—enough space to fit an entire preschool class of toddlers.

Rodriguez knows her aunt loved Romeo as much as anyone else. "Just minutes before she gave him a kiss. A couple minutes later she would be the one to kill him," Rodriguez says. "That's not something you expect or ever imagine could happen."

Rodriguez has not talked to her aunt since the day Romeo died, and the family that used to spend every holiday together has since split into two groups that don't speak. For the Rodriguez family, life will never be the same. Romeo's highchair and favorite clothes sit untouched. The home that used to be known for its Halloween and Christmas decorations now sits bare.

Yadira Rodriguez has now committed herself to publicizing the danger of vehicle blind zones. "If we had

known more about this, my son's death could have been prevented," she says.

"If we're not aware of the problem, we can't do anything about it," Rodriguez adds. "Whether you have backup cameras or not, be aware that you can't see children from the rearview mirrors of most SUVs."

An Indiscriminate Tragedy

On the morning of April 24, 2005, almost one month before Romeo was killed, Bill Nelson took his 15-month-old son, Alec, to a birthday party. After some coaxing, Alec took his first pony ride. "He'd been watching his older brother and sister, and he was a little nervous up there," Bill remembers. It's his last memory with Alec.

Cautious parents from the day their first son was born, Bill and Adrienne Nelson bought a home at the end of a cul-de-sac specifically to avoid traffic. When baby seat anchors hit the market, the Nelsons drilled into their older car to install the safest car seat possible. When Adrienne read a Reader's Digest story about the danger of loose objects during car accidents, she insisted on installing a cargo net in the family's station wagon.

It was a beautiful spring day when Bill Nelson left the house to run weekend errands. Adrienne was packing the children's clothes for a sleepover at grandma and grandpa's. As she packed her dad's Ford Explorer, the children played with a hose, washing down a gazebo in the side yard.

When Adrienne ran inside to get some diapers, her dad decided to move the Explorer closer to the door, so she wouldn't have to walk as far. Alec's grandpa checked his mirrors and looked cautiously out the windows before he put the SUV into gear. Nobody had seen Alec wander from the gazebo into the vehicle's blind zone. Alec's grandpa never saw him.

When Bill Nelson pulled back into the driveway, his father-in-law was lying on the ground, moaning. Bill looked at his wife, who appeared to be nursing Alec under a blanket. She stared back blankly.

"I thought there was something wrong with my father-in-law," Nelson says. "Then I was looking at him, and he told me that Alec was dead. I couldn't believe it. You just don't know what to do."

Driveway deaths are often the fatal result of a tragic perfect storm. Children, usually toddler-aged, think they're being left behind and run to the vehicle. From the driver's seat of many vehicles, drivers cannot see the ground for as far as 15 feet in front and behind the vehicle. If a toddler wanders into that blind zone area, even the most attentive driver won't be physically able to see them.

"We have a video that shows 62 kids behind a Suburban. You can't see a one of them from the driver's seat," says Fennelle. She regularly sits parents in the driver's seat of their vehicles and places orange traffic cones in their blind zone. For some common vehicles she can place as many as 20 cones before the driver can see a single one.

Bill and Adrienne had read about backover and driveway deaths just weeks earlier, but they never associated the distant tragedy with themselves. Now they spend their time warning parents about the size and danger of vehicle blind zones.

"It wasn't ever well publicized that a blind zone is that big," Adrienne says. "You always figured that if you looked in your side mirrors, and you looked in your rearview mirror, and you knew where the kids were, that it would never be an issue. I remember after it happened to Alec thinking, 'Oh my gosh, I never thought it would be us.'"

"People honestly think they can control their vehicle, but they don't realize how big the blind zone actually is," Adrienne says. "It's no longer anything to do with how good of a driver you are."

These days the Nelsons have added more safety features to their vehicles, including both rearview cameras and backup sensors. A 2006 report from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration concluded that sensors are safer than having no device, but that video systems are the best way of preventing backover deaths.

A Matter of Seconds

June 28, 2005, was almost one month to the day after Romeo Rodriguez's tragic death. Mesa parents Eric and Michelle Quick had never heard of Romeo Rodriguez or of Alec Nelson. They were as cautious and protective as any family, but they didn't realize their Chevrolet Suburban had a blind zone of nearly 15 feet in front of the front bumper.

At age 10, Michelle had lost her mother. Now a mom herself, she was determined to protect her own family at any cost. Eric, an EMT, had also seen his share of vehicle and household accidents. If any family were to protect their children, this picture-perfect family seemed to be the one.

At IKEA that morning, 20-month-old Tiffany Quick chased her older brothers through the aisles and furniture, her messy hair spilling down over her blue eyes. At home she enjoyed an Otter Pop while her dad fixed the air-conditioning on a friend's car.

Soon the entire family was in the garage, saying goodbye to their visitor. Michelle had college homework to finish and asked Eric to move the family Suburban into the garage while she took the children inside.

Michelle opened the door and headed down the hall with Tiffany. When their newborn baby started crying at the other end of the house, Michelle headed for the nursery. About the time she realized Tiffany wasn't with her, she heard Eric scream.

Like the Rodriguez family, the Quick's first thought their situation was a one-of-a-kind freak accident. They had no idea that Tiffany's death was one in a growing trend of preventable deaths. Now having seen nearly a dozen more such accidents in Arizona, the Quicks are frustrated at the lack of public awareness.

"Across the U.S. three parents a week have to experience what my husband and I experienced," Michelle Quick says from the family's new Mesa home.

Statistically, most marriages end in divorce after an accidental child fatality. The Quicks have stayed together, but it hasn't been easy. "The problem is that no one should have to experience this, especially when we have the technology to prevent these tragedies.

"People don't understand a kid can be standing in front of your car, and you can't see them," Michelle says. "You can't see what's in front of your face. People have to really honestly think, this can happen to me. If it could happen to me, the safety-conscious mom, it could happen to anyone."

In the last year, the Quicks have sold both their dream home and the Suburban. Seeing the driveway and driving the truck were just too vivid of reminders.

"Our kids are everything to us," Michelle says. "We struggle. Even though we know we're going to see Tiffany again, we struggle on a daily basis. Tiffany lived inside of me. She lived in my home. I was up with her every night. She would just lay there and look up at me with her beautiful blue eyes."

Michelle and Eric have found a measure of closure in their work to prevent driveway deaths for other families.

As the two-year anniversary approaches, Eric is still tentative about parking in the driveway. He always walks around the car before getting in. Sometimes he walks around twice.

<http://scottsdaletimes.com/feb07-feature1.asp>

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