
Heatstroke Stories

It Can Happen to Anyone!

Jenny Stanley

“This might seem like a sad story, but it’s really a hopeful one. I’m sharing my story with you because I’m hoping that something good can come out of our tragedy.”

My name is Jenny Stanley, and I want to share my story: a parent’s worst nightmare, the loss of our heavenly angel, Sydney.

The day that changed our lives forever started as a regular Sunday in August 2010. My husband, Mike, and I were having our usual battles with our three kids before church. “Find your shoes,” “comb your hair,” “tuck in your shirts,” “yes, you have to wear something nice.” But, like every other Sunday, we managed to get there right on time.



After church service, as we gathered the kids to head home, Sydney, our beautiful daughter, who was 6 at the time, asked if she could bring home her Sunday school craft project. She didn’t get a chance to finish it in school and wanted to complete it at home. Of course, I said yes.

When we got home, we had lunch and went about our day – just as we always do.

Sydney asked if she could go next door and play with her best friend, Anaya. Sydney and Anaya were always running back and forth between our two houses. Anaya’s mother and I had an unspoken understanding that we would “share” responsibilities for watching the girls.

Our oldest child, Logan, who was 12 at the time, and I took off to run some errands. After we left the first store, I called Mike and asked him to have Mason, who was 10, go next store and tell Sydney to come home. I figured it was just about time for the girls to come back to our house.

A few minutes later, Mike called back. “Sydney is not there,” he said. You see, we lived in a great neighborhood – kind of like the ones we used to grow up in. All the kids played together outside. They rode bikes. Wrote on the sidewalk with chalk. And there was always a group of kids playing the sport of the season.



You could even stand on your front porch and yell for the kids to come home for dinner. The only thing you had to worry about was how many kids you would end up feeding at the end of the day. It was a great neighborhood.

I gave Mike a list of the homes where Sydney might be so he could track her down. A few minutes later, Mike called back again. “She’s not at any of those homes,” he said.

I asked him to drive around the neighborhood to look for her, and I was going to come right home to help.

Logan and I were about halfway home when I received a call from an unrecognized number. When I picked it up, I couldn’t understand what the person on the other end was saying. I hung up and called back.

I recognized Mason’s voice, but I could only make out a handful of hysterical words: “We found Sydney in the car,” he yelled. “She is very blue.”

By the time I got home, a sheriff’s car and an ambulance were already in front of our house. As I ran inside, our neighbor stopped me and said, “You need to know that she is very, very blue.”

I continued to race into the house. I found Mike sitting on the stairs. He was holding his knees and saying, “it’s too late, it’s just too late.”

Then I turned, and that’s when I saw her. The police and paramedics were working to resuscitate her. I heard myself scream at the paramedics, “Please don’t stop, please don’t stop!”

After what seemed to be forever in some ways, but seconds in others, we were told that they were taking her to the hospital.

We were about to follow behind the ambulance when the head EMT came back into the house and told us that they had done all they could. Our beautiful little girl was gone.

Mike and I walked to the ambulance, sat down, and held Sydney’s hands for the last time. That moment was a feeling I cannot describe; there was so much pain. There still is.

I had always heard the term “died of a broken heart,” but I thought it was just a saying. I now know what it’s like to feel heartbreak.

We’ve asked ourselves over and over how this could’ve happened to our beautiful angel. We don’t have a definite answer, but as a mother who knew her child, I believe I know what happened.



When we returned home from church, I gathered all of the items from Mike's car and took them into the house, including Sydney's unfinished craft project. When Anaya was not home to play, Sydney must have checked in the car to find the craft that she wanted to finish, and that's when she became trapped inside.

This might seem like a sad story, but it's really a hopeful one. I'm sharing my story with you because I'm hoping that something good can come out of our tragedy. I don't want any other families to have to go through the pain that my family has endured.

Unfortunately, heatstroke happens more than you would think, and it can happen to anyone. But I want everyone reading this story to know that these tragedies are preventable.

So please, look before you lock your car, and once all of the children are out of the car, make sure the car is locked so they cannot get back in. And please, never leave your child alone in a car, not even for a second. Here are a few more tips.

Sydney loved butterflies, and we loved to listen to Bon Jovi in the car together. She also loved her art and crafts. Who would ever have imagined that Sydney would take her last craft project to heaven herself?



Reggie McKinnon

“I made a promise to my sweet Payton that I would do everything I could to prevent this horror from ever happening to another innocent child.”

My name is Reggie McKinnon. I live in Cape Coral, Florida. Three years ago, on March 8, 2010, my wife Julia and I experienced the most devastating event that can happen to a parent: the loss of our baby girl, Payton Lyn. It was a day that changed our family forever.

I met my wife Julia when we were sophomores in high school. I played varsity sports and Julia was a cheerleader. It may sound corny, but it was one of those cases of love at first sight. We started dating in 1988 and have been together since.

Prior to that tragic day in 2010, we had three wonderful girls, which to me is a miracle in itself. My wife and I tried for over seven years to conceive a child. We went through all the testing and procedures, including In vitro fertilization, to no avail. It seemed as if we were destined to remain childless.

When we finally resolved ourselves to that fact, my wife became pregnant. I can't tell you how elated we were. We welcomed our first, Madison Elizabeth, in 2005.

We prayed for another child and God blessed us with our second daughter, Haley Marie, in 2006.

My wife and I had originally planned to have another child. However, given our situation, we felt that miracles just don't happen a third time. Thank God we were wrong, and our beautiful little Payton Lyn arrived in 2008.

Julia and I have been very blessed with healthy children. The only health concern they've ever had is that they've inherited their mother's propensity for ear infections.

Fortunately for us, these ear problems can be brought under control with a minor surgery in which drainage tubes are placed in the ears. Each of our girls successfully underwent the procedure, with Payton, who was 17 months at the time, being the last.

It was after one of her checkups that our lives were horrendously changed forever.



Payton's appointment was March 8, 2010. Because Julia is a teacher and I am a supervisor at a telecommunications company, it is easier for me to get away from work for appointments. Therefore, I was the one who would take her for her checkup.

The girls attend the daycare just up the street from my office. I usually get to work early, so Julia dropped off the girls at daycare that day. I picked up Payton at 8 o'clock and we drove to her appointment. I was so proud of how well she behaved for the doctor. After she was finished, I hurried back to work to complete my day.

The weather that day was so beautiful. March had been so cold, and this was the first warm day of the year. The temperature was in the mid-70s. I remember walking to lunch with one of my co-workers.

I was so relieved that Payton's surgery had healed perfectly, and so I had a nice lunch with my co-worker going on and on about the family and our most recent outing to a Boston Red Sox spring training game.

I had a really busy afternoon and was so grateful when it was time to leave. I was really fortunate because the girls were just down the street and so I didn't have to rush.

I was walking to the car and spoke with a few friends on the way out. I then opened the back door of my SUV to put down my laptop.

That's the exact moment I'll never forget.

To my horror, I realized Payton was still in her car seat. It was the last thing I remember.

I heard someone screaming. Then I realized the screaming was coming from me. The rest is just a total blur.

Before this accident, every time I would read of a child dying in a parked car of heatstroke, I would ask, "how could they forget their child?" I would never do that. That only happens to people who are uneducated, drunk, drug addicts – not me.

Don't be fooled into thinking that this can never happen to you. Unfortunately, I was. Experts will tell you this can happen to anybody. They say our busy lifestyles create enough stress to trigger mental "lapses." It appears that minor changes in daily routines contribute to these mental lapses and that "the stressed-out brain" can bury a thought – something as trite as a coffee cup or crucial as a baby – and go on autopilot.

And while all that might be true, I can tell you personally, when you've been through it, it doesn't really help.



I made a promise to my sweet Payton that I would do everything I could to prevent this horror from ever happening to another innocent child. That's why I'm sharing my story to try to educate families and friends about the risks of heatstroke.

Although the temperature that day in March was mild, I had no idea that within 10 minutes the temperature within a vehicle can rise 20 degrees. That kind of rapid rise in temperature can be deadly for a small child.

Out of all of this tragedy, a blessing occurred for our family on January 19, 2011. Our daughter, Olivia Grace Laila, was born. She has been a true gift – and no ear surgery so far.

Because of all I've learned and experienced, I feel very confident that she'll always be safe from heatstroke – and that feeling of knowing I'm equipped to do everything in my power to keep my baby safe makes me feel better. It's a good feeling. And it's a feeling every parent deserves.



Dawn Peabody

“I’m sharing my story to encourage every parent and care provider to learn a new “muscle memory.” To never leave a child alone in a car.”

My name is Dawn Peabody and I’m from Phoenix, Arizona. Five years ago my husband, Wes, and I endured an unimaginable tragedy. We lost our beautiful two-and-a-half-year-old baby girl, Maya, to heatstroke.

It happened on October 18, 2008 – a date that I will remember for the rest of my life.

My in-laws were visiting, and we were all heading out to a family breakfast. As we walked to the car, Maya ran next door to say “Hi” to our neighbor.

Maya was so confident and outgoing, which was a good thing, but we always had a problem with her running off and hugging people in public, so we wanted to make sure she learned how to follow directions. I clearly remember telling her: “Maya, muscles have memory. Do we need to practice walking to the car?”

Muscles have memory.

It’s something I used to say all the time. It was just a fun thing to say when we needed to practice a behavior. Such as “we go potty, then wash our hands.” “First the socks, then the shoes.” “Sippy cup, prayers, kisses, then bed.”

The idea is that if a behavior is repeated enough, our muscles will remember even if our brain is distracted or turned off for whatever reason.

I still think about those words every day.

She told me: “No mama, me saying hi to Mr. Andy. Me muscles know how to walk to the car.”

Because we had so many people and because I had to go directly from breakfast to work, my family split up into three cars and went off to breakfast. We had a lovely time. Maya had eggs – she was always trying to put syrup on her eggs.



After breakfast, I left for work in my own vehicle – the car the children usually rode in. I normally took Maya to work with me.

But because my in-laws were visiting, the plan was to let her stay home with the rest of the family. My father-in-law is a real cowboy, and he was going to teach them how to rope in the backyard.

So this time Wes took Maya in his car, the one he usually used only to travel to and from work. The rest of our children rode home with Grandma and Grandpa.

Normally, Wes worked on Saturdays, and when he got home, he just left the car and went into the house.

Muscles have memories.

Wes was playing with the other children and Grandpa in the back yard. An hour later, someone asked, “Where’s Maya?” and he said, “She’s sleeping with Grandma; I’ll go check on her.”

But Maya wasn’t sleeping with Grandma or in her own bed. Wes ran to the car, and that was the moment that forever changed our lives.

I received a frantic phone call from my husband, to come quickly to the hospital. But by the time I got there it was too late. The Arizona heat had taken our daughter’s life.

For the longest time, it was so hard to accept that our little Maya was gone. And it was even harder to talk about.

Then I read about another family who lost their baby to heatstroke, and I saw the harsh comments that family had to endure. Hurtful comments that I’m sure were from good people who just didn’t understand how this kind of accident can happen.

And that’s when I realized I needed to help. That as difficult as this has been, there can be some good to come out of it.

It’s why I’m sharing my story to encourage every parent and care provider to learn a new “muscle memory.” To never leave a child alone in a car. To always look before you lock. To get the message out about the harmful and potentially fatal effects of leaving children in hot vehicles.

No parent should have to go through this tragedy. And if my story can help prevent similar tragedies from happening to other families, then that makes it worthwhile.

