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'Zero Seconds Equals Zero Incidents'

By: Karen Cernich



It only takes a second for convenience to turn into tragedy when kids are left alone in or near cars. That's the message Terrill Struttmann, Washington, will be stressing to parents, caregivers and hopefully the national media this Friday, Sept. 5, at a press conference for his nonprofit group, Harrison's Hope, previously known as Kids In Cars.

The event will be held at the Holiday Inn Select next to America's Center in downtown St. Louis at 9:30 a.m. to unveil the organization's new Zero Seconds program to educate children, parents and caregivers that it's never safe, even for one second, to leave a child alone in or around a car. The event is being held in St. Louis in the hope that it will attract more national attention, said Struttmann, executive director of Harrison's Hope.

Everyone is invited to attend the press conference and Struttmann specifically said he would be honored if Franklin County residents could be there as well as at the TRG Motorsports VIP party being held at the Ninth Street Bar & Grill, Holiday Inn Select, from 7 to 11 p.m.

"We want to thank the (Washington) community for all of its support," he said. "The people here were like a silent voice for us saying, 'We believe in what you're doing.'"

TRG Motorsports is a new addition to the Harrison's Hope supporters. The professional NASCAR racing team, which participates in the Craftsman Truck Series, is allowing its drivers to be spokespeople for Harrison's Hope and will include the nonprofit's logo on their trucks.

This Friday's press conference is tying in to a Craftsman Truck Race being held Saturday, Sept. 6, at Gateway International Raceway.

New Name, New Tag Line

The locally based nonprofit changed its name from Kids In Cars to Harrison's Hope in October 2007 as a tribute to Struttmann's son, Harrison, who was killed in 1998 in an accident that resulted from other parents leaving their young children alone in a running vehicle. Struttmann said he and his wife, Michele, had always wanted Harrison's name to be part of the organization and it seemed like the time was right to do it.

Another organization with a similar purpose is named Kids and Cars, Struttmann noted, and that was often confusing for people, as well as the media.

Although the new name doesn't offer any hint of the group's purpose, the logo does. It includes a car, the words ". . . not even for a second," and an adult and child standing together pointing at the word "Hope." "That's our focus - hope. We are focused on saving lives," said Struttmann. The new tag line of Zero Seconds came out of a planning meeting with a consultant where everyone kept repeating the words as they discussed their goals. They quickly realized it was a good catch phrase that people would easily remember and that summed up everything about Harrison's Hope. "Zero seconds equals zero incidents," Struttmann remarked. "We're taking a zero tolerance on near misses."

He is referring to cases like the one he read about a while back in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch where an RN left her 5-year-old child in the backseat of her running vehicle so she could run into a convenience store and grab a coffee. When she came out of the store, the car and her child were gone.

"Luckily the child was found later, but what struck me about that story was how the woman said doing this - leaving her child alone in the car to grab her coffee - was part of her 'daily routine,'" said Struttmann. "She did this every day. This was an educated woman who works in health care and she thought it was OK. How many parents out there do this every day?"

Too many, he knows. Harrison's Hope keeps track of the number and types of accidents resulting from kids being left alone in or around cars (more than 4,170 incidents since 2000), and Struttmann has read and heard stories that break his heart, mainly because the accidents were completely avoidable.

There have been children killed in car fires they started accidentally using the cigarette lighter, children killed in incidents involved the power windows, car seat straps, car trunks . . .

One story with a happy ending proves how dangerous even an unlocked car just sitting in a driveway can be when kids are left unsupervised. Two boys who were playing outside one day thought it would be fun to hide in their family's car trunk opened the door to pop the trunk, climbed in and closed it. After a few minutes they wanted out, but when they pulled the emergency latch it broke. No one knew the boys had gotten in the trunk and had it not been for a premonition their sister had to check on her brothers, they might not have been found.

The boys' mother, Sally Carter, shares the story on a new DVD presentation of the Zero Seconds program. Carter contacted the Struttmanns after the incident involving her sons because she was so surprised that a family as safety conscious as hers could have been so close to tragedy.

"She told me she had no idea how dangerous an unlocked vehicle in her own driveway was to her children," said Struttmann.

Take Message To the Kids

With its new Zero Seconds program, Harrison's Hope is taking its message directly to children. The goal is that once kids understand being left alone in or around cars isn't safe, they will keep their parents and caregivers on point, said Struttmann, much like they know to buckle their seat belts.

"We want to empower kids," he remarked. "If they are being left alone in a car, to have the courage to say, 'I don't want to be left in the car. It's not safe.' "

As part of the program, kids actually take a pledge to never play in or around cars, and adults pledge never to leave a child alone in or around cars. Adults also pledge that they will make sure all children have left their car before walking away from it and when in a parking lot, ensure every child has the hand of an adult.

"There's a false sense of security out there, and that RN in St. Louis is the perfect example," said Struttmann. "She never even thought about the danger she was putting her child in until it was too late.

"We want people to be aware of how quickly these things can happen. It only takes a second - that's why we say 'zero seconds equals zero incidents.'"

DVD Kit

Harrison's Hope is available to give presentations at schools, churches, civic group meetings . . . regarding its Zero Seconds program, but it also has a DVD presentation kit available. The kit includes an eight-minute overview video and additional clips specifically for educators, community leaders, media, parents and service groups. The kit also features a DVD with all of the program materials and literature educators, parents, media . . . would need to hold a presentation on Zero Seconds.

"We would love to give the presentation at our local schools here and once they have the kit, they can give the presentation year after year," said Struttmann. "They could make it part of a safety week. It could be an all-school presentation or they could do it in individual classrooms, whatever works.

"What's great about the DVD kit is that anyone can get involved," he added. "Anyone can buy the kit (\$17.25 at www.harrisonshope.org) and show it to their family, friends, their social club, their pediatrician, their daycare provider . . . anyone."

The Zero Seconds DVD was filmed in Washington in and around St. Francis Borgia (SFB) Grade School. A number of local people are featured in the film, including the Struttmanns' second son, Peyton, and his class at SFB.

The cover of the Zero Seconds DVD kit shows Steve Lange and his daughter, Brooke, of Washington.

Currently people or organizations that want to have the Zero Seconds DVD will have to purchase it, but Harrison's Hope is seeking a private or corporate sponsor to underwrite the cost of the DVD and also support the hiring of a program director to oversee Zero Seconds.

"I feel like we're on the cusp of this exploding on the national scene," said Struttmann. "I feel everything is in place now. We have a powerful presentation to distribute, so that's what we hope to do."

For more information on Harrison's Hope, people can call 636-451-0606 or visit www.harrisonshope.org.



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