

## ***It happens in an instant - a parent recalls a sunny afternoon in June...***

Father's Day 2003, a perfect evening for a barbeque with our friends and neighbors. We sat in the shade enjoying a delicious meal, watching our children playing in the sandbox, squirting each other with the hose and romping in the pool. Christopher, our 2-year-old, hadn't yet learned the meaning of modesty so he was naked, of course and we had taken his life-jacket off for dinner. The older kids just laughed at him and joked about his sand encrusted backside. At some point my husband decided enough was enough, there were girls present, so Christopher donned a diaper, the really absorbent kind.

While the guys were outside chatting and the kids were playing, Gabby and I went to the kitchen to wrap up leftovers and get ready for dessert. Christopher was still playing in the sand box with Samantha. Jake, Manny and Andrew were done swimming but had left the pool ladder down just in case they needed another dip. Manny mentioned that we should probably put the ladder up but there were plenty of us watching the pool so no worries. Just a normal day in the neighborhood as we soaked up the relaxation and contentment that comes from just such a day.

In an instant, everything changed.

A shout, a splash and a moment of complete and utter confusion; my husband saw a doll on the bottom of the pool, but it wasn't a doll; it was our baby, Christopher. No, it couldn't be. We never take our eyes off that child for a minute because he's fast, curious and blissfully fearless.

I will never forget the look on my husband's face as he dove into the pool to retrieve Christopher floating near the bottom. I can't erase from my mind the picture of my limp, lifeless son as Gabby began CPR to start his heart and bring him back to life. I will never silence the screaming that was me, his mother, believing that the worst had happened *while we were all watching*. I will forever see my older son's shock and horror as he watched his brother's cold, blue body, laying on the lawn, struggling for breath, for survival. In an instant, everything changed.

My mind jumped ahead to the worst possible outcome while I swept the food from his mouth; a dead child, an empty bedroom, the extra scooter, hand-me-down clothes with nobody to wear them, what am I going to tell people, why *my* son, the hideous funeral, counseling for the other kids, *it can't be*, our life changed, the agony, the guilt, who can I blame. It's amazing how fast your mind can work.

By the grace of God, our son is alive and our families were spared a nightmare that would never have ended. We brought Christopher home from the hospital after a night of observation. A nice, long nap and he wanted to go swimming.

The doctor said he had no memory of the event and would have no lasting damage from the incident. No so for me, for my husband, our older son and our neighbors.

The #1 cause of accidental death in children between the ages of one and four in California is drowning. As the paramedics and ER doctors told me, it typically occurs at someone else's house; a neighbor's house or while visiting grandparents. Drowning is random and silent; there is no flailing and splashing. Your child doesn't scream for help, they just float helplessly to the bottom and run out of breath. You take your eyes off your kids for an instant and it *can* happen.

We all believe that the rules that we set around the swimming pool will protect our kids. Certainly, people whose children drown must be bad parents. I am here to tell you that it doesn't happen to bad parents, *it just happens*. We have strict pool rules, our neighbors have strict pool rules, you have strict pool rules but in an instant, it happens. Despite your rules, the gate gets left open, the ladder is left down, the cover is left off or the telephone rings.

Though there may be classes claiming to "drown-proof" infants and toddlers, the fact is that *nothing can "drown-proof" a child except absolute vigilance by parents and care-givers*. It is a terrible misrepresentation and potentially life-threatening lie to list a class for children as "drown-proofing." Life-jackets, water-wings and swimming lessons are important tools and should be a given for anyone around water but when it comes to children, water is a danger that demands respect; and a wary and informed approach.

I believe a combination of clear, strict legislation in pool construction and retro-fitting, aggressive outreach campaigns to educate parents and pool owners on water safety and a serious push for CPR training for anyone who is around water is the only way to significantly impact the current California statistics. Although I am certified in CPR, it was Gabby, also certified in CPR, who was able to take charge of the situation and breathe the life back into Christopher.

Unfortunately, it is inevitable that there will be preventable drowning deaths this summer but if just one child is saved because we shared this experience, I would be grateful. I wouldn't wish the horror we went through on anyone and we were the lucky ones. As one paramedic said to me in the ambulance, "these things usually don't turn out like this...."

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