

Episode 151 – Laura’s pain became her purpose

If you’re a parent, you know – there is nothing more precious to you than your child. You would do anything for them, to keep them healthy, and happy, and safe.

But sometimes, even the best parents with the best of intentions can have a brief lack of focus, and the results can be devastating.

The subject we’re talking about today is hot car deaths. Outside of crashes, heatstroke is the leading cause of death in vehicles for children 14 and under. In 2022, it happened 36 times. So far in 2023 the total stands at 26. And that’s just in the US. For more than half of these, the person responsible unknowingly left the child in the vehicle. This is something that happens to loving, caring and protective parents.

As you hear Laura talk about what happened, you’ll hear the pain in her voice. It’s a heartache that will never go away. But before this conversation is over, you’ll hear something else: determination. Because Laura is on a mission to make sure that what happened to her doesn’t happen to other parents.

Like many of the stories we talk about on this podcast, today’s episode requires some alerts about the content. You can find the content warnings for this episode in the show notes, at WhatWasThatLike.com/151

Scott

Before we get into the story of what happened, I'd like to have you take us all back a little bit when you and Aaron had just become new parents and baby Anderson came into your lives. What was that like just being a parent of a new baby?

Laura

I think we fell very naturally into parenthood. It was definitely something that Aaron was very involved throughout the whole pregnancy - coming to every ultrasound, every appointment, every pediatrician appointment. He was involved and caring.

Scott

It sounds like Aaron would not be the one who says, “Laura's pregnant,” but he would say, “We're pregnant. “

Laura

Always. He was so involved. He had pregnancy books that he would buy off of Amazon and he would read those chapters throughout each trimester. And he would always say, “Babe, we got to do this. Babe, I read this. Babe, did you know this?” And we had a very difficult– well, it was an easy pregnancy, but I had what was called placenta previa. He made sure that I was staying healthy throughout the pregnancy and made sure that Anderson and I were safe. In our last ultrasound, we discovered that I no longer had placenta previa and I was able to have a natural birth and my husband was so excited about that.

We have one of those great big exercise balls. So he had brought that down into the living room and started playing YouTube videos because we couldn't go to Lamaze classes or anything like that because of the pandemic. I just remember him sitting on top of this exercise ball, watching these YouTube videos, and he's like, "You got to move your hips around like this, babe. You got to do this. It's going to open your hips and it's going to be for a better birth." So he was very involved and he just kept everything so fun throughout the pregnancy. There was never a doubt in my mind about what an amazing father he was going to be. He was already such a special human being and to just create this perfect little human knowing that there's Aaron for Anderson. He was just so natural at it.

Scott

At the time you worked from home, what kind of work were you doing then?

Laura

I work for a large banking company in the fraud department. I had just left a job in the mental health field, and I just wanted something that allowed my schedule to be a little bit more flexible, to have more time with Aaron and Anderson. So I started this new endeavor and I was doing amazing at this position. Aaron was always bringing Anderson up for my team meetings. My team and my manager all knew Anderson and Aaron. Anderson would be in the Zoom calls with us and he was, like, our little team mascot. It was a lot of fun. We had this thing every week where we would do what we did over the last weekend or the week. So, at each meeting, we would share pictures and activities of what we had been doing and everybody looked forward to the pictures with Anderson. So I had actually left that team and got on another team and was still submitting pictures to my old team to keep up with Anderson.

Scott

And at the same time— you worked at home, but Aaron worked in an office. So he would go to work every day. You'd be at home and, typically, Anderson would be at daycare during the day.

Laura

When I had Anderson, I stayed a few months on maternity leave and his parents took turns coming from out of state just so we didn't have to put him in daycare as soon as it was time for me to go back to work. Aaron was working in the office. I was working. When I got a different position, I started working at home. But yeah, Aaron worked in the office.

Scott

In talking about what happened, this really started kind of on Sunday afternoon. I think you mentioned Anderson had developed a little bit of a temperature or fever that day.

Laura

It had been a really hot day on Sunday, the 26th of June. We had just got a new puppy for Anderson. We already have a dog. Then, we ended up getting a puppy. We wanted Anderson to have a dog to grow up with.

Scott

Every kid should have a dog, yes.

Laura

Every kid should have a dog. Our dog, Miles, was just not really fond of him. He's 9 years old now. He had never been around babies, so he wasn't too enthused, but we had decided that it

was time. So we got a puppy. That Friday, I had just started a new work shift. I had put in for a shift bid and won. So I was no longer on the same schedule that we were typically on. So, the first week of June, I started a new schedule. Aaron and I had switched. I would take Anderson to daycare and he would pick him up from daycare and bring him home. Now my new schedule had me up in the morning and getting Anderson ready for Aaron to take to daycare. Then, I would pick him up when I was done with my shift. So that had already been a change in our routine.

Fast forward to Friday, our puppy got sick. I had to take him to the emergency vet. He had gotten the trash and ate a corn cob. I stayed the entire day at the animal hospital, and Aaron had to pick up Anderson. So, he had already been off of his normal schedule that we had been adhering to for the past three weeks. So that happened on Friday. Then, Saturday was just an easy breezy day. We played outside. We swam in our little pool out back in the yard.

On Sunday, I had taken half a day off of work. I wanted to go outside and do some yard work. I started trimming our hedges. I never did that - have never done that. Aaron was laughing at me and he's like, "Good luck out there. It's hot." So I think I maybe trimmed 1 or 2 bushes and I came inside. I'm sweating and I was just like, "I don't want to do this anymore. Will you go out and finish?" And he said, "Well, if you take Anderson and go get us lunch at the grocery store, I'll finish." I said, "Well, that's a great deal."

So I took Anderson. We went to the grocery store, picked up a few groceries, and picked up lunch. He started to kind of be a little bit whiny in the grocery store. He just wasn't happy with anything. I could tell that he wasn't feeling well. He was yawning a lot. So we left and went back home. I took his temperature and he had a fever. So I had sent a message to the daycare on Monday morning, and I said, "Hey, Anderson was sick yesterday. He had a fever, we're just adhering to the 24-hour fever-free policy."

He no longer had a fever on Monday but, because he had that fever on Sunday night, I didn't want to take that chance of taking him to daycare. So I alerted them on Monday through their app. They immediately responded, "We hope he gets better and we'll miss him today." Aaron and I took turns that day. He stayed home in the morning while I worked and I had taken a little bit of PTO that day to stay home with him during the afternoon. Aaron stayed in the morning and then he left for work.

Scott

Anderson was feeling better by this time anyway. He wasn't even sick anymore, right?

Laura

Yeah, he was feeling much better. He didn't have a fever anymore and we had been giving him children's Tylenol. He was absolutely fine. It was probably around 4 o'clock, I think, that Monday. I had made him lunch. He was sitting at the dining room table with me with his foot up on the table, and he just had chicken and broccoli and rice all over his face. Aaron texted me and said, "How's our boy doing?" And I sent him a picture. I said, "I think he's doing a lot better. He doesn't have a temperature and he just ate all of his food. So he's doing good."

That night was just a normal night. We put him to bed and I always hoped that Anderson would wake up in the middle of the night and I could bring him into bed with us and cuddle with him. He woke up crying. He wanted to be held and cuddled in bed. I was like, "Fine by me." I'll go get him. Aaron was always like, "Babe, we have to stop letting him sleep in our bed." But he was

just as guilty of it as I was. There were so many times when I would find Anderson in bed when I came upstairs.

So, in the middle of the night, I brought him into our bedroom and it was probably around 4 o'clock in the morning that he woke up. He was crying and I thought, "Well, maybe he still doesn't feel good." He didn't have a fever, but I went downstairs and got him some water and some children's Tylenol just in case. When I went back upstairs, I realized that this was June. We have a duvet on the bed. He's in a long-sleeved-footed pajamas and he's sleeping in the middle of Aaron and myself, so he's obviously going to be hot. So I took his sleeper off and threw it on the floor. We just laid there and he started to fall back asleep. I was rubbing his back.

I picked up my phone and I thought to myself, "I'm just going to go ahead and try to request off work just in case he is still sick." I'll give him a couple of hours before we wake up. I think my shift started at 7. I got on my work app and I requested off and I got approved. So we fell back to sleep. It was probably around 6 in the morning. We had woken back up. I had taken him downstairs and, looking back, we were already off schedule because I would have been going into the next room into my office and starting to log into work.

Anderson always ate breakfast at daycare ever since we had switched my schedule but, this particular morning, he was up, he was ready to go, and he was hungry. So I went downstairs and I fixed him avocado toast - the usual avocado toast with sliced bananas - and he had a bottle of milk. We watched a new show on TV that we had never watched before. I thought, "Let's watch something different than Sesame Street." We started watching this cartoon and he was so enthralled with this show. I thought, "Oh, we just found a new show that he can watch."

Scott

What was that show?

Laura

Handy Manny. I had never heard of it before. A girl that I followed on YouTube mentioned it one day and I thought, "Oh, it's on TV right here. Let me click on it." It was just different for him because we didn't really allow him to watch television other than Sesame Street in the morning. We really listened to music and he watched sports with his dad. He was either watching chess or soccer with Aaron. He and I were sitting on the couch. Aaron had come downstairs and he said, "How is he feeling?" And I said, "He's fine. I took off from work, but it doesn't make sense now that he's completely fine. He doesn't have a fever. He's eating. He's happy. He's laughing. He's playing." And he said, "Well, I want to give him a COVID test before we take him into daycare." We waited until he was done and gave him a COVID test, gave it a couple of minutes, and it came back negative. He was completely fine.

I said to Aaron, "I'm going to go ahead and contact my manager and have them put me back on the schedule today. There's no point in me keeping him home. He's already been fever-free since Sunday night." When I sent the message to his daycare, I said, "If he's not going to be there, I'll let you guys know." I'm always in contact with his daycare. I'm always sending messages, always giving them a heads-up. There's never a time when we just didn't bring him to daycare. There was never a time when we forgot to pick him up. If we were going to be late, if he had a pediatrician appointment, I always let them know the day before, and I always put it in the little app that they had. I had told Aaron, "Go ahead and take him to daycare. I'm going to go

ahead and get myself back on schedule, so I don't waste a day. There's no point in keeping him home. He's fine." He said, "Okay."

So I went upstairs, got him dressed, and we brushed our teeth. I remember him running down the hallway into our bedroom where Aaron was getting ready for work. It was a little bit earlier than usual. I remember it being 8.10 in the morning, and I thought to myself, "I hope my manager responds back in the next 5 minutes so I can jump on and not lose too much time that I have to make up." I said goodbye. I gave them a kiss. I went upstairs to log on to my computer. I remember hearing the laundry room door open and something in me panicked. I said, "What's wrong?" It was Aaron and he said, "Nothing's wrong. I forgot my phone." I said, "Oh, I put it on the coffee table for you." And he's like, "Oh, thanks, babe." And I said, "You're welcome. I love you. Be safe." He walked out the door and I continued to log onto my computer and get set up for work.

A couple of hours had gone by and it didn't even occur to me that I wasn't getting any of the notifications from daycare saying he ate breakfast or changed his diaper. It's very convenient to be able to see what your child's doing throughout the day. So I was working. A couple of hours had gone by and I realized that his 4th of July parade— they were having a 4th of July parade that Friday and my in-laws were supposed to be coming down. They wanted to go and watch him be in the parade at daycare. I couldn't remember what time it had started. So I'm on the phone taking calls for work and I opened up my email and there was an email that I missed bringing decorations for their little classroom party after the parade. I signed up for that. I got the confirmation email that it was received.

After I got that confirmation message, for some reason in my mind, I thought that it was time for me to take my lunch at work, so I logged out and went downstairs. I thought to myself, "I'm not even hungry. What am I supposed to do for my lunch break?" Then, I looked at the clock and I started laughing to myself. I'm like, "My gosh, it's not even my lunchtime. I'm out of routine today and it just threw me off." There was a lack of sleep for both of us. So I went back upstairs and I told my manager, "I'm so sorry. I logged out. You're going to have to fix my schedule again."

Then, I thought to myself, "I haven't heard anything from daycare." So I sent a message through the same app asking, "Hey, just want to check on Anderson. I want to make sure he's doing okay" because I had told Aaron, "When you drop him off, please let them know that he's perfectly fine. He hasn't had a fever. I am going to try to get back on my schedule, but let them know if they need me to come get him, I will come and get him."

When I sent this message, I continued to take calls. We're talking probably around 11. When I sent the message, I didn't receive anything back. While I was on a call, I received a phone call from his daycare. I couldn't pick it up right away because I was ending this phone call with a customer. As soon as I hung up, I called back within a minute or two. I remember them answering the phone and she said, "Anderson didn't show up today." And my stomach just sank. I said, "What do you mean he didn't show up? Aaron brought him earlier this morning." She said, "Hold on, let me go check his classroom." I can hear her walking down the hall. I can hear her shoes on the floor. I can hear her open the door and I can hear all the other kids in Anderson's classroom. I hear her ask his teachers, "Is Anderson back here?" I can hear them saying, "No." And she said, "Are you sure he did not come?" And they're like, "No, he's not here."

I just hung up the phone. I didn't know what to say. I just was kind of frozen. I remember just standing in the office. I immediately called Aaron and he answered and he said, "Hey, what's up?" And I just started screaming and said, "WHERE IS ANDERSON?" And he's like, "What do you mean?" I said, "WHERE THE FUCK IS OUR SON?" And all he said was, "OH, MY GOD, OH, SHIT." He hung up and I just thought to myself, "This isn't happening. This is not right." For some reason, when the teacher said that he hadn't shown up, in my mind, I was like, "Well, Aaron definitely wouldn't have not went to work and went out on an adventure with Anderson without me. That would never happen." But in my mind, I'm like, "God, I hope that's what happened," knowing full well that that wasn't the case. I don't think I was fully processing what was happening yet.

I ran into my bedroom and I threw on whatever I had on because I was still in my pajamas. I remember calling Aaron over and over, and he's not picking up. I am in the laundry room at this point, putting on my shoes. I was halfway out the door and I called him again, and I could hear him. It's almost like he had thrown the phone somewhere, but I could hear him in the background crying. All I could hear him saying is, "Please. Please, I have to go. It's bad. I have to go. I really have to go. I'm so sorry. It's really bad." I hung up the phone and I knew he wasn't talking to me.

I knew he couldn't hear me. So I grabbed my keys and I dialed 911 as I got in the car. I was never good at finding my way around the city because, when we moved here, it was the pandemic and we didn't go anywhere. Anywhere I went was always with Aaron. So I couldn't even figure out how to get to his work. My mind was so scattered. I didn't know what to do. I'm panicking. I'm on the phone with 911. I'm literally getting on and off of exits doing, like, figure 8 and I'm freaking out on the phone with dispatch.

I finally make it onto the right road to go towards Aaron's work, and I'm giving them all of the information, his car that he drives, what Anderson was wearing, his birthday. She gets off of the phone with me - the 911 dispatcher. I'm traveling down the road with my four ways on, passing people and just- I felt like I was living in a dream, a nightmare. I pulled into his parking lot at his work and it's missing Aaron. There were cops there. I got out of the vehicle and they said that they searched the entire parking lot and they could not find Aaron or Anderson or the vehicle. I thought, "Well, maybe he took him to the hospital."

So I was calling and calling Aaron, trying to figure out where he was, where they went, what was happening, and was my baby okay. The police officers asked me if I had our locations turned on and that never even occurred to me. The officer had taken my phone and we were looking at the location.

Scott

That's how you can tell by GPS where the other phone is.

Laura

Yeah. We shared our Google location. He had gone on a trip in April on a fishing trip, and that was the first time he had ever been away from Anderson and myself. So we made sure that his location was turned on just so we knew that he was safe. The cops had been calling all the hospitals to see if they had shown up. Aaron was not answering the phone. All of a sudden, I got a text message from him that said, "Go to hospital." And then, immediately after that, it said, "Right now." I text, "What hospital?" The cops are saying, "They're not at any hospital."

That's when they took my phone and looked at the location. They said, "Well, this is the road that he's showing." I said, "But that's impossible. That's our house. He's saying that he's telling me to go to a hospital." From there, I laid in the grass at his work, screaming. There were people standing outside and I remember screaming, "WHERE'S AARON BECK? WHERE'S AARON?" DID YOU SEE AARON BECK?" I remember the sun beating down on me and my face in the grass, and I was crying. I didn't know what was happening, where my child was, and where my husband was.

There were police everywhere. They asked if I had somebody to call and I said, "All of our family is in a different state." There's really no one that I can call. I had given them my neighbor's name. So they took my phone and they called my neighbor and she came right away. So she sat with me as we waited for them to tell us where they were and a police officer had come over to me. I don't remember much about what was being said, but I do remember the police whispering, "Turn your radios down." So I couldn't hear anything.

My phone rang and it was Aaron. He said to me, "Baby, I killed our son. I'm so sorry. I love you."

I don't think that I heard anything else after that. I couldn't process anything other than knowing that Anderson had died. The police took my phone and I could hear Aaron yelling, "I NEED TO MAKE SURE MY WIFE CAN HEAR ME. I NEED TO MAKE SURE SHE CAN HEAR ME. I LOVE YOU." Then, that was the last time I ever heard his voice.

And I heard the cop say, he said, "You can find his body 50 yards back of the house." By that time, my neighbor and I had been just laying there on the side in the parking lot in the grass. The police officer came up to me and said, "Mrs. Beck, I'm sorry, but Aaron and Anderson are no longer with us."

I don't even know what happened after that point. They put me in an ambulance and took me to the hospital. I just kept yelling that this is all my fault. I should have just stayed home from work. I should have just kept my baby home.

Scott

I don't know how you would even process the gravity of hearing that.

Laura

I don't know either.

Scott

Did they say why they were taking you to the hospital?

Laura

I honestly don't know. I remember saying, "I don't need to go to the hospital. I don't want to go to the hospital. I need to go see my baby. I need to be with my husband. This is not happening. I do not need to go to the hospital." I was adamant about not going. They had an ambulance waiting for me. There was a detective who was in the ambulance with me asking what happened that morning. I gave them the exact rundown time - like specific times - and everything leading up to it. They had taken me to the hospital. I don't remember much of the ride. I remember being on the stretcher and just watching the highway out the back door windows. I just kept saying, "This is all my fault. I should have just stayed home. If I had just

kept my schedule the way it was when I had requested off that morning and just kept him home, this would never happened. It just didn't feel real.

Like, how do you go from being on cloud 9, having everything in your life that you've worked so hard for and you're finally happy, you have everything you need and so much love and laughter and happiness and plans for our baby's future, for our future, how do you go from all of that to absolutely nothing within hours?

I remember being in the hospital and my neighbor and her husband and their son had been there. She started making phone calls for me to our family. They wanted to admit me into a mental health facility because I was saying that I didn't want to live. I just wanted to die. That's all I kept saying. I was just blaming myself and that I just wanted to be wherever they were. I didn't even care. I didn't want to do anything. I was able to get discharged from the hospital. My neighbor's husband had told the nurses and the doctors that if he could go into my house and take all of the scissors and knives and everything out of the house, basically, I could be discharged.

I stayed at their son's and his wife's house that night. The next day, the house was just full of family members who had come in from different states. I rode with my best friend back to our home. As soon as I walked into our house, the first thing that I saw was an empty plastic bag with a sticker on it that said infant child body bag. I saw that laying on the couch and I'm sure you can imagine how awful it is to see that in your living room.

I had learned that Aaron left work with Anderson, took him into the house, laid him on the couch, and Aaron had panicked. He had taken a crowbar and broke into the gun safe upstairs because, apparently, he couldn't find the key. I was told that the house just looked like it had been ransacked. The things were pulled out of the drawers. I guess that he was looking for the key to the gun safe.

Scott

I would imagine, in thinking through this, you must have tried to put yourself in his situation and, many times, think the thoughts that are going through his mind.

Laura

That man was so in love with our son, and he knew that there was just so much guilt and shame he wasn't able to live with himself after that. My husband was not ever suicidal. That was something that would have never crossed my mind. His love for Anderson was so profound. I don't think that there's any question about how much he adored Anderson and how proud he was to be his papa. I can understand why he did what he did because I look back at it and I think to myself, "If that was me, imagine opening your back door and seeing your child lifeless, and knowing that you caused that not intentionally..."

Scott

Even the fact that it was an accident is completely overshadowed by the guilt that you would feel, for sure.

Laura

Right. So he had taken his life behind our house in the woods.

Scott

Is that something that you realized had happened even when you were back in the parking lot?

Laura

No, I don't remember processing that. I remember him saying what he said to me on the phone. I could hear the panic in his voice, but it didn't occur to me that he was planning on doing what he did. I never imagined that would happen until the cop came up to me and said that they were no longer with us.

Scott

A few days later was their funeral, and you spoke at their funeral.

Laura

Yeah. I don't remember much of the funeral other than the funeral director, Sarah. It was a funeral that she had never quite done before. We had one casket and Aaron and Anderson were in there together. Aaron was holding Anderson and they were matching Pittsburgh Penguins jerseys.

Scott

They were both fans, huh?

Laura

Oh, yeah. My husband was making quite the little hockey fan out of our son. He had little plastic hockey sticks that he would hold up in the air and he would scream, "Let's go!" just like Aaron used to. They had been there together. Sarah was so compassionate and you could tell that this was affecting not only our family and our friends, but everybody involved in the process. She had let me hold Anderson before the funeral started. She had shut the doors and had a rocking chair next to the casket. I took one of his favorite blankets and some of his bedtime stories. I just sat in the rocking chair and rocked my baby and sang him the songs that Aaron and I used to sing to him. I read him the bedtime story. He loved when I would tickle his back. I just remember putting my hand up the back of his shirt - his little Pens jersey - and just feeling his back and how soft he was, tickling him, kissing his cheeks, and playing with his hair.

I remember kissing my husband so much that the makeup was coming off of his nose and his forehead. I was just numb. I know that I got up and I spoke at the funeral. I don't remember too much of what I said. I didn't have anything written. I tried to write something the night before, two nights before. I think I got through one sentence and I'm like, "I can't do this. How do you prepare something like this for your 18-month-old and your 37-year-old husband? They were just here a week ago. Why am I doing this? I can't. What should I say? This is not right."

I just remember I did get up at the podium and I think I talked about Aaron and when we first started dating - just some of the kind of dates that we would go on and how he loved putting together PowerPoint presentations for just a fun Wednesday night thing that we would do - and just talking about how passionate and intriguing he was and how he would make the most boring things seem so intriguing, and it would just pull you in his excitement to learn and to share what he learned was so significant. I mean, I never cared about meteor showers. I never cared about learning about different kinds of trees and leaves, going for walks in the woods, and listening to podcasts on our road trips. He was the best road trip partner I had ever had. Never got bored with that man, not once. I think that all I could talk about was those happy times.

I remember somebody from his work - one of his coworkers - had gone up to the podium and encouraged other people to come up and share stories. The room was full. I remember when I stood up at the podium, just looking at the room and people were standing. There were so many people there. To hear his friends, his coworkers, his family, and my family get up there and tell stories and share how inspirational he was to people was so beautiful because we all see Aaron in different ways. I see him as my husband. I see him in this personal intimate way where his friends see a side of him that I still see. His mom knows him in this way and his sisters know him. There are all of these things that Aaron provided to every single person in his life. And at the end of the day, the world lost such a bright soul. It lost two bright souls and they had such an impact on everyone around them.

Scott

When you hear other people talking about him, you get such a different perspective on who he was.

Laura

Yeah, and I love hearing the stories that they share. It was really sad that we were standing there telling these stories, watching the slideshow of the pictures and videos that I had put together. I just remember staring at the casket the whole time, still not believing that it was real.

Scott

One of the things you said that happened at the funeral is that you read from a children's book that Anderson really loved. What was that?

Laura

It's called *Wherever You Go*. His Nana had bought us that book. The amount of books that this little boy had in his library was outstanding. We had so many books. Even though we had children's books, my husband would still read Carl Sagan books to him. He would read him comic books every night at bedtime. I had one particular book that my mother-in-law had sent us called *Wherever You Go*. I read this book. Just looking at the pictures, it's about this little bunny that leaves home and they're on a little bike. Along the way, they're picking up all these other little animals, becoming friends, and going on journeys with them. Then, as the book progresses, you see the bunny dropping their friends off at their destinations.

This book just reminded me who I was aspiring to be as a mother, not having a great childhood, not having the support, encouragement, and a support system. I wanted my son to have everything that I did not have. My husband and I, from the day that we found out that we were pregnant, we had so many dreams for him. There was never a day that went by that I did not soak in his love and fully embrace being a mom. I never took a day. I never took advantage of— not one day. This book reminded me of what I want to teach him as he grows up, that no matter where you go, you will always have a home to come back to. So I read this book to him as I held him.

After everybody was done sharing stories, I remember getting up to the podium and I said, "I just want to read a couple pages from this book." This is my favorite part of this book. The artwork in this book is just so whimsical and beautiful and it just really tells a story just in the artwork. The book itself is so beautifully written. This is just towards the end of the book. This is one of my favorite parts. It says,

"Roads...remember.

Every life landmark, the big and the small.
The moments you tripped,
the times you stood tall.
Where you are going, and where you began.
What you expected. What you didn't plan.

Roads... return.

During your journey, you'll ramble and roam,
but sooner or later, you'll think of your home.
After you've seen all you needed to see,
a road takes you back where you're longing to be.

Back to that hill, under that bridge,
deep in your valley, high on your ridge.

Roads take you all over the planet,
but then you always can follow them home once again.

Scott

And we'll have a link to that book in the episode notes for anyone with children who'd like to get it. My wife is a private nanny for a family with four small children and we got it and she read it to them and they loved it.

Laura

Yeah. It's a beautiful book.

Scott

I actually contacted the author - who is Pat Zietlow Miller - because I want to make sure we had permission to read that excerpt here on the podcast and, of course, she was fine with that.

(Pause)

Okay, now I'm getting choked up.

What you didn't know until right now, while we're having this conversation, she has a message for you.

Pat

Hi, Laura.

I wrote *Wherever You Go* for my oldest daughter as she was getting ready to leave home and venture out into the world. I filled it with all the advice and wisdom I thought she'd need as she handled life's twists and turns. After I wrote the book, I realized I have also written it for myself because the older I get, the more I realize that no matter how much I try to manage my life, there are so many elements that are uncontrollable and that life is about how well I can adapt when the path I thought I was on takes an unexpected turn. I was very happy to learn that *Wherever You Go* was one of your favorite books to read to Anderson as a family. That's the best thing an author can ever hear, and I want to thank you for the work you're doing to help and support other families. I wish you the best on all your roads ahead.

Laura

That was really beautiful.

Scott

She's a wonderful person.

Laura

Yes, she is. Thank you.

Scott

You have made it your mission to prevent this from happening in the future. What are you doing now?

Laura

After this happened, I pretty much just buried myself in my mattress and my couch for months. I wasn't on any social media. I wouldn't read the news. I wouldn't listen to the news. I was in such a dark place. I'm not saying that I don't still have those times, but the last year has been very difficult. One day, I bought a book off of Amazon and I can't remember what it's called. To this day, I have not even read it, but it was about trying to heal from the loss of your child. I was kind of just thumbing through the table of contents and there was a chapter in there about suicide. At this time, I felt like there was no further down in rock bottom that I could possibly get. I opened this book and I flipped to the chapter of suicide. At the bottom of it, it said something along the lines of, "If you were not here, then that's one less person to tell their story." That just kind of ignited a spark in me.

Days after this happened, I said, "I didn't understand. I was angry at my husband. I didn't understand how he forgot about our son. I didn't understand why he left me. I didn't understand any of this." When I read that in the book, I thought to myself, "This is such a unique situation. Not only did I lose my son, I lost my whole family within hours on June 28th." I kept telling myself there has to be something that has to come from this. This can't all be happening. I just sit here and go on with my life without trying to help other families. From that point on - my goodness, I don't know what came over me - I feel like it was rage inside of me. I was going through all of the different stages of grief, all of the emotions - up and down. I had been in a facility for three days because I didn't think I could handle my life anymore.

After reading that and really letting that sink in, I thought to myself, "My husband was such an amazing person. He was an amazing friend, an amazing son, a brother, a best friend, a husband, a father, and his legacy should be so much more than what this tragedy is, as well as Anderson's." We only had my son for 18 months but, in those 18 months, this tiniest little human being had the biggest life and the biggest personality, and I would like to consider ourselves as the best parents that I knew. I started to reach out to state legislators.

I was very angry with daycare. Why did I never receive any notification that he was not there that day or even ask, "Is he still sick? Do you plan on bringing him?" I had been angry at why my husband's car was not equipped with any type of technology— like, why we had never heard of the things that are out there to help prevent these. So I now am advocating as much as I can mentally handle to share our story and spread awareness about hot car deaths.

My hopes are that people will see how normal of a family– I mean, I don't know if normal is the right word, but just how loving. Our house is full of love, laughter, and light every single day. There was constant banter, joking, dancing, music, and everything. I want to really stress to parents that my child is not here. My husband is not here to help me grieve my son. And I never want parents to have to go through what I have went through and what so many other families have gone through and are still going through.

There's been well over 1,050 deaths related to hot cars. That number is still climbing. 2023, we are up to, I believe, 21 now.

Scott

And this is something we see all the time here in Florida with the excessive heat. It's such a contrast that you guys were, like, the most loving family and the most loving parents, and just by a slight little blip in memory– which means it can happen to anyone.

Laura

It truly can. The biggest advice that I can give to people listening, especially to people who truly believe that this won't happen to them, they care too much about their child, they would never forget, I can honestly tell you that Sunday when I took Anderson to the grocery store and we left, I always park next to those cart corrals. I put him in our vehicle, I closed the door, and all I had to do was just swing the cart around and put it in the little thing. I remember thinking to myself, "Oh my God, I have to get in there and start the car. I don't know how people can actually forget about their kid." I had the thought that two days prior. I was still that person passing judgment on how could a parent forget their child. There was never any room in my thought process. There was never room where I was keeping an open mind thinking, "Oh, well, I could see how that could happen." I was a very judgmental person and it's not that I heard of these stories often. You really only hear what the media is putting out there.

The fact is the change in routine is the biggest cause of these tragedies. If you go back to what I was saying earlier about, we just got a puppy. Things were chaotic. I had just started a new shift. My husband was working on some project at work where he was a little stressed out about it. We had been up all night with a sick baby - well, a crying baby. He was no longer sick. We were up earlier than usual. Anderson was eating breakfast and that's not what he did. I had called off work and then I told my husband, "I'm going to go back to work." Then, my husband walked out of the door and came right back in to get his phone. I think that might have been what caused him to think that he had already dropped our son off. He wasn't used to dropping him off in the morning. It had only been a three-week routine.

So my biggest advice is don't think that you're invincible. The worst thing that you can do is to think it's not going to happen to you. If your child is in daycare, have a plan in place. Talk to your child care provider and you make sure– because I'll tell you right now, and I don't know if this has changed from when I learned about this last year, but there is only one state in the whole US that requires child cares to call parents when a child is absent and they have not given notice.

Scott

That just seems like the bare minimum of what should happen.

Laura

It does. It seems logical that you have this 4:1 ratio - my son's classroom. It's not like the classroom has 30 children in it. It's a very small number of toddlers. I'll never get over the fact that I let them know that he was sick on Sunday and that he wasn't going to be there on Monday. They had never heard from me saying he wasn't coming because why would you send a message to your school saying, "Hey, they'll be there today." You're just automatically going to assume that they're going to be there unless you hear otherwise. Well, nobody heard anything from us. So when you're counting children and you're serving breakfast and there's an empty seat but nothing was said, we need to make sure that there are better systems in place because there are no laws requiring that. You would think that it's logical, but there are a lot of things that would make sense.

I stress now to parents and friends who message me about how they have new vehicles and rear seat reminders and that's great, but it doesn't stop there. Car dealerships. When you go to buy a vehicle, they're not giving you a whole tutorial on every feature of that car. They're telling you about the bells and whistles with the sound systems and backup cameras, which are great. But when you have rear seat reminders - a lot of those vehicles and people don't know this - a lot of those vehicles that have those reminders are only activated when you open that back door. For example, if you put your child in the back seat and you're on your way to work, but you need to drop your son off or your daughter off at daycare, but you stop and you get gas, you've now shut your car off, that rear seat reminder is going to come on, but you're going to wave it off because it's not time to take your child out of the car. You're going to pump your gas. Well, now you've turned the car off, that alert is done. You get done pumping your gas, you get back in your car, but you never open that backseat again. You never open the door. So now there's no alert that has been activated. So we can't rely on those dashboard alerts.

So I have been working with kids in car safety and we have become a project of kids in cars and my nonprofit is called Anderson's Alert. I have said from day one that I will fight until I have no more breaths to take. I will fight in their honor to make sure that there are better systems put in place. There's a law that needs to be for childcare facilities. It really needs to be looked at.

Automakers. The safety standards are just so minimal and we're fighting for better safety standards and sensors in the back seat. There are things that are already out there and they cost less than \$50 to install. There's a lot we can do and the resources are there. Unfortunately, people don't know what those resources are and what the causes of these tragedies are until it's too late.

Scott

There's a whole lot to be done, for sure.

Laura

There is. There is.

Scott

I love that you're channeling your love and your grief, and taking all that energy and putting it into advocating for this. How can people join you in this?

Laura

The website is andersonsalert.org. Again, we are a project of Kids and Car Safety. They are a nonprofit, a 501(c)(3), and they are dedicated to advocating and spreading awareness for the dangers in and around vehicles, not just children, but pets as well. It's because of them. It's

because of Jeanette and her team that we have pull latches in trunks, we have backup cameras, we have the power windows instead of a toggle or the little switches because children were getting strangled. Right now, a big focus is front over cameras and still pushing for the detection in back seats.

We have an Amazon wishlist right now. We're putting together comfort bags for a local police department here. That idea actually came from another mom who sadly lost her son, Ollie, due to a hot car death. Her nonprofit is Be Kind for Ollie. They put together these comfort bags for police to keep in the back of their trunks for any time that they have a call and there's a crisis where a child is involved, either to keep them preoccupied or, if it's a traumatic situation, there's coloring books, baby blankets. So we are kind of piggybacking off of that and trying to give back to the community. If anybody wants to learn more, you can go to kidsandcars.org.

You can go to andersonsalert.org and you can read the stories of other parents. When you read these stories, you'll notice patterns and those patterns are changes in routine. Be very mindful of your routine and of your schedule. Slow down. Put a plan in place with your childcare provider. Put a plan in place with your family. Have your location turned on on your phone, just in case. Check-in with your partner that you have dropped off. A lot of daycares have check-in-check-out systems but, again, don't rely on your childcare provider to send you notifications or to call you. Nobody is going to go above and beyond for your child like you will.

And yeah, it's just not helpful to think that it's not going to happen to you. This has happened to lawyers, judges, police officers, and an actual rocket scientist. This happens to the best of parents. It's not a crime to forget. But when this happens, there's such a stigma involved that this parent obviously didn't love their child enough because they didn't remember them in their back seat, and that's so far from the truth. Everybody says, "I can't imagine what you're going through. I can't imagine that happening to me." Well, I don't want you to have to imagine that. I'm here to tell you that we led a beautiful life and it was all taken away that Tuesday.

So if you do have a newer vehicle and you do have those reminders, please read the actual manual that comes with it. Call your car manufacturer. Ask to talk to somebody about how it actually works. Learn your vehicle. Do not assume that the vehicle is going to keep your child and you safe. Spread that awareness. Even if you don't have little ones, I'm sure that you know somebody that you're close with that does. Help them and be their village. We have to rely on each other.

Scott

It's only been a little over a year since this happened, and as you can tell, it's not easy for Laura to talk about it. Partway through our conversation we took a break just to kind of "catch our breath" a bit, and Laura was concerned that her emotions were overshadowing the story –

Laura

I'm sorry. This is really intense, and I don't know if you could even use any of this.

Scott

Everyone who hears this is going to 100% understand how intense this is, and you're doing an amazing job.

I have so much respect for her. When she tells this story, she is essentially reliving that horrible day. But she pushes through that pain because of her love for Aaron and Anderson, and because of the importance of their story.

If you or someone you know has young children and you'd like to get a copy of the children's book *Wherever You Go*, you can get a signed copy from an independent bookstore called Mystery To Me Books in Madison, Wisconsin. What a great Christmas present, right? You can call or email them to make that happen. In the episode notes I'll have the contact information for that bookstore, and all the other resources we talked about, including Laura's website and her podcast.

You'll also see pictures of Laura, and Aaron, and Anderson there – that's all in the episode notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/151.

And I wanted to let you know about something new with the podcast. One of the questions I get sometimes is – hey, what about that person who was on your show a few years ago? Have you heard from them? Can we find out how they're doing? So that's something I'm going to make happen. Probably about once a month, on one of the "in between" Fridays, I'll pick an episode from way back, and I'll play that full episode, then I'll have a brief "new" conversation with the guest to see what's happened in their life since then and how they're doing now.

Each of those is going to be called a "Flashback episode" – and the first one will be just a week from today! I think it's gonna be fun to hear from those past guests and I'd love to hear what YOU think of it.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz.
Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And here we are, at this week's Listener Story. If you're new to the show, this is something we do every episode – we end with a short story that was sent in by a listener. And that means I want to hear a story from YOU! Think about something that happened to you that's interesting, or funny, or amazing, whatever – if you can tell it in 5-10 minutes, record it on your phone and email it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com. Seriously, do this! We want to hear your story!

This week's story is about a father's message – from the afterlife.

Stay safe, and I'll see you in a week with our first Flashback episode.

Female 1

Hi, Scott. I wanted to share a story with you that happened recently. A couple of months ago, my dad was terminally ill with cancer and was in palliative care. I visited him every day and we shared stories and memories the entire time until he was too fatigued to be able to communicate anymore. Before that time, I told him about a story that I had read on Reddit. It was about a young man with his father who was also terminally ill, and they created a pact that when the father died, he would come back and send a message to the son. They came up with a plan that the dad would somehow tell the son that his leg hurt.

Fast forward a few months later, and the dad has passed away, and the son is at a nightclub. He's not really drinking that much. He's awake. He's alert. Someone comes up and approaches him and says, "I'm so sorry to bother you. We don't know each other, but I had this overwhelming urge to tell you that my leg hurts." Of course, cue the son, bursting into tears, feeling, "Hey, that's my dad, he's communicating with me from the afterlife." So I tell this story to my dad and I think he kind of brushes it off. He's not really listening. Of course, he's tired too.

So we come up with our own pact, and I say, "Okay dad, when you pass, if you can send me a sign in the form of your favorite movie, which I know what it is, then I will know that is a sign that you're okay. I will also go ahead and watch your favorite movie because I've never seen it before." So he agrees. I don't really know if he's listening, but he goes with it.

Fast forward about four weeks later, he has passed away. He passed away on a Wednesday night. On Thursday morning, my cousins and family were over at his house with me. We're just kind of sharing our own stories of him. Before he passed, I had been making an effort to go through his house tidying and cleaning everything, but remembered that there was one box of family items that I hadn't yet opened. So my cousin and I sat on the floor and decided to open this box that was filled with different china items from my grandparents. They were all wrapped up in newspapers.

The first item I picked up— I opened the newspaper to look at the item, but my eyes averted to what was in the middle of the newspaper, which was an advertisement for my dad's favorite movie. The newspaper had been wrapping that china for probably about 30 years, so it wasn't anything recent. What I found particularly amusing about this was that, on the newspaper, it said, "Last days. Must finish Wednesday, as far as the viewing." And again, he passed on a Wednesday.