

Episode 172: Janette was kidnapped

There are few forces in the world stronger than a mother protecting her baby.

If you're outdoors and you happen to come across a mama bear, everyone knows you better not get between her and her cubs. Actually, it's a bad idea to be anywhere near them. If you appear as any kind of a threat, it's not gonna turn out well.

But I would say that's just as true for human mothers. They will do anything to make sure their baby is safe – and that includes risking their own life to save their child.

Janette was a young mother. She and her husband, Greig, had a young baby – their son Alex was just 9 months old.

So Janette and Greig had just arrived home. Their little Alex was still in the back seat of the car, strapped into his car seat. Then it happened. Just minutes later, they were in the car while it was being driven by two armed kidnappers.

She wanted desperately to protect her baby, but there was nothing she could do.

Janette and her husband were locked in the trunk.

Scott

Are you claustrophobic?

Janette

That's so funny you ask. I am extremely claustrophobic.

Scott

Oh, man.

Janette

This was not a good situation for me.

Scott

That took this to a whole new level, I can imagine. All right. Well, let's set this up for us. Where were you living at the time, and who was in your family?

Janette

At the time, we were living in San Francisco and I had just had my first baby. Prior to that, I had worked for Eastman Kodak and Helene Curtis and had about 20 years of sales and marketing under my belt. But at this point, I had my first baby and that's what I was doing and concentrating on.

Scott

Your baby was Alex... And how old was he at the time when this happened?

Janette

Alexander was nine months old.

Scott

Okay. And do you call him Alexander all the time or is Alex okay?

Janette

I call him Alexander. He truly prefers Alex.

Scott

So we'll just say Alex. And this was in the fall when this happened?

Janette

Yeah, this happened on a Saturday night. So not only was it the night that the time changed, but it was also Halloween weekend.

Scott

And what kind of car did you have at that time?

Janette

At that time, again, we were living in the city and my husband's job was in the city, so we only needed one car and that's the car we had. It was an old Lexus, one of the largest sedans that they made. So it was big enough for car seats and all the equipment it takes to have a baby and go from point A to point B.

Scott

That night, you were out with some friends. Can you just talk about what we were doing and just take it from there, just kind of a minute by minute, what happened?

Janette

Well, we had plans with friends to go to dinner and we were going to meet them someplace. They just absolutely insisted that we come to their house and bring the baby because they wanted to see the baby. They live just north of San Francisco. So we went to their house, had a wonderful evening, and then we headed back into the city. As we approached our home, we pulled into the driveway and, of course, had the automatic door opener, and the garage door went up. We pulled in, but before the garage door had a chance to go all the way down, two masked men with guns slipped in underneath. They kind of rolled underneath - maybe what a dog would do.

Scott

Were they hiding somewhere on your property, do you think? What have you thought about that?

Janette

Yeah, my sense is that it was Halloween weekend, so they had masks on and they didn't look out of place because you could be going to a party. So they had masks on. My sense is they were just kind of strolling around in the neighborhood and finding or trying to find someone who maybe let their guard down and they were going to rob them and do whatever they had in mind, but it was very random. We didn't know who this was or why this was. So our sense was they

were just kind of cruising the neighborhood and looking for someone to take down. Like I said, if it had been three seconds, that garage store would have been all the way down and they would not have gotten into our garage.

The next thing that happened was they put loaded guns to our heads and ordered us to get into the trunk of our car. Of course, none of this made sense. I think they must have been in the wrong garage. They were very insistent and shoved us into the trunk of our own car and slammed the lid. Well, During that entire time, our baby was asleep in the backseat and they didn't even know that there was a baby involved in this whole situation. So, it wasn't until they slammed the truck and then opened the car door, they could see that obviously there was a baby and the only thing we heard them say was, "There's a baby."

They took off out of the garage. We're traveling through the streets of San Francisco at a pretty high rate of speed. And if you can imagine, when you have two adults in the trunk of a car and you're going up and down the hills of San Francisco, in many cases, you're bottoming out the car, but what we were more worried about is, "Where's the baby? We couldn't hear the baby." My husband was the one closest to the back seat. I was closest to the bumper. I kept saying, "Can you hear anything?" And we couldn't hear anything. Just the thought of two men with guns in their hands inside the passenger compartment with our baby was really much more than we could bear.

Scott

Was it completely dark in there?

Janette

It wasn't completely dark when we were traveling through the streets of San Francisco and the reason for that is you have taillights and brake lights and all of those things. So there is a teeny bit of light. It was pretty dark, but there was a teeny bit of light. We were praying a lot. We were trying to figure out where the baby was. I mean, nothing made sense. I remember saying to my husband, "I saw this Oprah segment and it talked about if you don't get away from your abductors in the first five minutes, you're dead."

Scott

Yeah, that's the rule. Never go to the second location, right?

Janette

Absolutely. But, we didn't have much of a choice in the matter, especially since our baby was there. We couldn't have run because then the baby would have been left all to himself.

Scott

So you're kind of stuck in that spot. How much could you move around when you were in the trunk?

Janette

Well, it was very limited. I know my husband was feeling around because we had a little tool kit that's in the trunk of a vehicle. After this had happened, at some point, we decided to try to get back in the trunk together but we couldn't. So my observation on that is I think fear shrinks you because somehow we did fit into that trunk one way or the other.

Scott

Wow. You mean after the whole thing was over, you experimented with how you fit in there?

Janette

That was years later.

Scott

Okay. And was it difficult to breathe?

Janette

As I mentioned at the beginning, I am very claustrophobic but, when you fear for your life, the survival instinct really kicks in. So my husband was looking for some tools and I started to do the only thing I thought I could do which was rip through the carpeting that was in the back of the car. I don't know why but just my sense of survival kicked in. So I started pulling and pulling on all that carpeting and it did expose. Wires and things that I wasn't even sure what they were, but it did expose some wiring that I started to pull on.

Scott

Do you have phones with you at that time?

Janette

Well, this was back in 1995 and we did have a phone but it was not one of those huge ones, but it was one that was big enough that you just left it in your car. So it was in the passenger compartment.

Scott

Not like today where you have it in your pocket. If you did, they would have probably taken it away from you anyway.

Janette

Probably.

Scott

Were you strategizing on thinking, "Okay, what are our options here?" What was your plan then?

Janette

Well, our plan was survival and our plan was to save our baby boy. I mean, it was, "Forget us, this is the most precious thing in the world to us." We have no idea where he is. We can't hear anything. Obviously, he's not crying. That doesn't mean anything because, when we pulled into the garage, he was asleep. We're going through the streets of San Francisco and I've done this so many times I could kind of tell, just the way they turned right and left, that we were headed south. For some reason, I said to my husband, I said, I wonder if they're taking us to LA or maybe to Mexico because I could just tell that the car was headed south. As I was exposing these wires, I could tell that we were going on the freeway. So it went from surface streets to the freeway. Again, you can tell that just by the speed and everything else. I didn't know if maybe we could get a message to the outside world that something was wrong with this vehicle. Maybe we would get pulled over or maybe a police officer would see it and then do something about it. So I'm pulling and pulling on these wires.

Scott

That's what I'm thinking. If you pulled some of those brake lights or back or rear tail lights or whatever, then the cop might pull you over just for having a tail light out. But if there had been a way for you to open the trunk at that point. Would you have done that?

Janette

I can't speculate, but maybe one of us would have gone to get help, especially when we could tell that we were on the freeway and then you could tell we went on an exit ramp so the car slowed down quite a bit, and that might have been a time to escape. But it was very difficult because you're torn between trying to get help and, at the same time, being there and protecting your baby.

Scott

So they got off on an exit. It sounds like you could tell they had some kind of destination in mind.

Janette

Yes. We could tell that they were back on surface streets. We had no idea where we were, but when they left the surface streets and went on to an unpaved road - like bump bitty bump - I'm like, "Oh no, that's it." I said to my husband, "They're going to rape me. They're going to cut us up. We're dead." I can't believe he had the presence of mind to say this, but he was like, "I don't know what's going to happen, but know that I love you." Basically, we were saying our goodbyes.

Finally, they stopped the car and I could hear another car running and they were saying things like, "Get it set. Make sure you get it set right." And I had no idea what that meant. In my mind, I figured they had the baby and he was in the car seat and they were going to put a gun to his head and say, "If you don't do this and this or this, we're going to blow your baby away." That's what my thought process was.

Eventually, they were talking to us and then they opened the trunk lid. And again, I'm claustrophobic. I have had back surgery. So, being in that position for that amount of time was extremely uncomfortable, but I poked my head up because I wanted to try to get a sense of where they had taken us. Well as soon as I did that, I got hit in the head with the butt of a gun and shoved back down and said, "Don't you be looking around." They wanted cash. They wanted jewelry. They wanted ATM cards. And they kept asking us, "What's the pin number for your ATM?" And the first one my husband gave wasn't right. I said, "No, it's not that." Then, they asked five different times and I was thinking, "Boy, they are stupid. Can't they get it?" But I guess maybe criminals ask several times to make sure you're not just making something up and they're getting the right one. So we did give them that.

Scott

So they probably had done this before.

Janette

I would say so. I mean, it might even have been an initiation to get in a gang or something - I don't know, but that's a guess. And then the last thing they said to us before they left was, "If this isn't the right pin number, we're going to come back and kill you." So as bad as that sounds, I found it kind of comforting because A) we had given them the right pin number, and B) that meant they were leaving. So that was actually good news for me.

We're stuck in this trunk and there was no light source. The car was not running. We didn't know where we were. There were no lights to be found anywhere. And of course, afterward, we found out we were in the middle of the projects in a forest. So that's why there weren't any lights.

Well, I'm focusing on this area where I had pulled all the wires. Again, this can only be defined as divine intervention because I saw this little light and, mechanically. If you're looking at this from the standpoint of an engineer, there couldn't be a light because everything was off and there was no source but I saw this little light and it was shining on a piece of metal. So I said to my husband, "I think I found the trunk release." Those words did not come from my brain, but they came from my mouth. So I took his hands, like, over my body and, I'll say, in the olden days, where you had a trunk release that was able to open your trunk remotely from the passenger compartment that would open the truck, and my husband knew that.

Scott

Right. Because that's a mechanical thing. It's a cable that goes all the way up to the driver's area and you pull a lever.

Janette

Yeah. If you're dropping somebody off at the airport and you want them to grab their bag, you just push that button and it opens the trunk. They grab their bag and away you go. That had existed. So I brought my husband's hands to that area and he felt around a little bit and he was able to find the cable that could open that trunk. He pulled the cable and the trunk opened up just the way it would've if you had opened it from the passenger compartment. At that point, obviously, I pole vaulted out of the trunk of that car, went to the back seats and there was no baby. There was no car seat. There was nothing. They had taken everything in the car.

Scott

What's going through your mind when you see that empty back seat?

Janette

Well, that was beyond the worst part of this whole situation, and it's so weird how your mind works during these times of stress and disbelief of what's going on. I said to my husband, "They've taken the baby. They're going to sell them for \$30,000!" Well, Where did I come up with that amount? That little kid was worth a million at least, but I said that and it just became the mantra. "We got to find the baby. We got to find the baby. We got to find the baby." So here we are in the middle of who-knows-where. They had taken everything.

I had hidden in the glove compartment in the owner's manual, one of these little plastic pop-out keys. It's a one-use thing. So we were able to actually start the vehicle and try to figure out where we were. I kept yelling at my husband, "Come on, let's go! We got to find the baby!" And he was kind of outside of the car, I guess, trying to see if somebody was still there or looking for hints and things or maybe even the baby out there, but I was like, "Let's go home. Maybe they took the baby out." And he said, "No, we're going to call 911." And I'm like, "No, let's go home. We're just going to get in more trouble." But he insisted.

We were able to see the lights of San Francisco to our left, so we knew we had to head north. I grabbed a little piece of paper and a pencil that was in one of the side compartments of our vehicle and I started writing down street names because I thought we were going to get lost. I have no idea where we are. Then, he insisted we call 911 and I'm like, "No, we're going to just get in more trouble."

Scott

I got to ask you about that. What was your reluctance on dialing 911? How would that have caused more problems?

Janette

Well, we were in the middle of the projects. I wanted to get somewhere safe. In fact, the first time he started to pull over to a pay phone, this whole gang of kids started coming to our car. As I was insisting that we go home and he said, "No, we're going to call 911", we found another payphone. Again, it was a dicey neighborhood. And within a minute of him calling 911, a car pulled up and there were all these grubby guys that got out. They had a poncho and were really sketchy. And I'm like, "Oh, I knew it. I knew we were going to get in trouble. They didn't hurt him. They didn't go to the phone booth and do anything. Then one of them came by the car. I was absolutely terrified. I would not get out of that car. He flashed a badge and I wasn't even going to believe him then, but came to find out they were undercover officers and that area was so dangerous that four of them traveled together and immediately the 911 operator had sent them to us.

Eventually, when they weren't hurting my husband, I decided to get really brave and put the window down a little bit and I said, "What are you doing? We got to go find the baby." And he said, "I'm on with 911 and they're going to send an officer to our home." So within that time, uniform officers showed up and I felt just a little bit more comfortable. Eventually, the officer got back to my husband and said, "Yes, they had gone to our home and they did find the baby. He was in his car seat, all alone, sitting in front of our home."

Scott

So he was probably there that whole time.

Janette

He was there that whole time. And it was in the middle of the morning by then.

The good news— cause I'm always looking for the good news. The good news was that they left him in his car seat. I frequently tell people that a car seat can save a child's life even if it's not in the car because if they had taken him out - he was nine months at the time - he would have just crawled into the street. That would have been the end of them. So they found the baby.

Scott

How many hours had passed from the time in the garage until the policeman found the baby?

Janette

That's just a couple of hours. I mean, it wasn't all night or anything. So once they found out about that, the officers that were with us wanted to find out if we could take them back to where this happened. I had written down those streets, so we were able to guide them and they got out and looked for some things. Then, it became this whole situation of them trying to figure out whose jurisdiction would be involved in this because our home was a crime scene, the place they took us was a crime scene, and our vehicle was a crime scene. And we just left our car sitting by that phone booth. We slipped it there because the officer said we had to come with them.

They did bring us back to our house. When we pulled onto our block, I mean, I couldn't believe it. There were cop cars and lights and all sorts of stuff going on. So when we pulled into the driveway, I could see, in the middle of the garage, there was a light and it was shining down on an officer who was holding our baby. Our baby was playing with his little walkie-talkie thing and he looked just fine. So that's when I lost it. I tried to get out of the vehicle but I was locked in. I was like, "Let me out of this vehicle or I am going to rip off this door." They go, "Just hold on, be patient." I said, "I can't be patient."

Scott

And you've already demonstrated that you can get out of a car that you're locked inside.

Janette

Absolutely, but I didn't realize— I mean, now that I think about it, when they take people in their car, they double lock it so they can't get out, but I had never experienced that. So finally, when I was able to get out of there. I ran into the garage, I took my baby, I went upstairs to my home, went into the rocking chair, shut the door holding my baby, and decided I would never, ever leave him alone. I would forever stay in that room, stay in the rocking chair, and just hold him.

Scott

That was a safe place.

Janette

That was a safe place. But people had other ideas as to what we were supposed to be doing.

Scott

After this incident, it would have been easy. You're holding him, you're safe. It's easy to think, "Wow, I'm glad we're okay. Let's not let that happen again." But you took action. What did you do over the next few years? How did that get started? How did that seed get planted in your mind?

Janette

Well, when we were with the police officers, one of them said to me, "It never ends this way." And I was like, "Well, what do you mean it never ends this way?" She said, "You don't have to have much of an imagination and look at the different things that happened to you tonight. People usually do not walk away unharmed." And that question got stuck in my mind, "How does it end? How does it end?" It was like a tape playing in my head. "How does it end? What did they mean?"

It may sound silly, but after going through the whole recovery and trying to work through PTSD, I got a fax from God - nobody believed that I got a fax from God, but I did - and it sort of said, "We spared your family and I've also given you talents. So get out there and change things." And I know when I told my minister that I got a fax from God, she said she had heard about different ways of people communicating with God but never heard of anyone getting a fax. That just was the way it was for me.

Scott

Well, can you elaborate on that? Do you mean you have a fax, or a piece of paper, or is this something that came to your mind as a thought?

Janette

It definitely came to my mind. I have no proof that one of those old thermal fax machines spit out something, but it was very clear to me I needed to do something. And you know how people always say, "There ought to be a law"? And I'm like, "This is crazy. How can someone be trapped in their own car trunk without the ability to get out?"

I thought about, many years ago, when I was young, children would be trapped in refrigerators because they were just thrown out on the front lawn for the garbage people to pick them up. Of course, kids are curious and they see the refrigerator and they get in, but they weren't able to get out because of this latch that was on the old type of refrigerators. So many years ago, a law was passed that said if you're going to leave a refrigerator out on your front lawn, you have to take the door off, and subsequently, the law said you can't manufacture refrigerators that have latches on them anymore so nobody could ever get caught in a refrigerator. I thought that was just like a perfect parallel to what had happened to us.

I started doing some investigation and I wanted to learn how it ended and what they were talking about. This was before Google because this happened in 1995, but there were some kind of rudimentary search engines at that time. So I would put in "Locked in trunk" and probably got about 10, 000 matches, and those had anything to do with you're going to go to a trunk show or truncation on phone lines, all sorts of things about trunks, and I would read each one of these one by one, and then maybe on 5,000 or 1,000, I would find a case and it would tell me about what happened during a trunk entrapment. My rule was I didn't get to count any cases where the person was already dead before they were put in the trunk because that wouldn't help anything because nobody had any information and nobody had any data.

I had to build a database all by myself using really rudimentary search tools. Again, I didn't know how to refine a search at that time, but these cases were brutal - rape, drowning, or car set on fire. It was terrible. So that's when I started writing to car companies and said, "Boy, you really need to do something about this." I was pretty naive that I thought they would actually do something about this. They basically were non-responsive. So that's when I figured out I probably needed to look at another avenue to make this go away.

Scott

And what you were telling them that they needed to do was to put that trunk release handle inside the trunk every time they made a car, right? That was your end goal?

Janette

Oh, absolutely. if you build something, you can get in, you got to build it so you should be able to get out.

Scott

What did you find, as far as the cases? Was this a widespread thing with fatalities or how bad was it?

Janette

It was pretty bad. All sorts of things that I would never even have imagined were going on when somebody puts you in the trunk of your car, takes you to a secondary location, and has full power over you and anything they want to do with you. I guess it became just this really convenient - and I've used this term - coffin on wheels to take people and do really bad things to them and, many times, kill them.

I had my piles of paper, read all the cases, and, unfortunately, at that period of time, my mother was very ill. She was dying from cancer and I was in the hospital and the nurses said, "What are you doing?" I explained what happened and I was looking for this information. One of them knew about a case where they were trying to figure it out, but it sounded like a trunk entrapment case and they connected me with the sheriff for that area. The sheriff for that area in Michigan happened to know his local US representative, who was Bart Stupak. Bart Stupak used to be a state trooper, so he was very familiar with this type of situation.

So I met with him and told him that we needed some help on this. He actually was able to get some language that was passed to add trunk releases but, oh no, there was a lot of fight about that. The best he could do at the time was to get language added to a bill that said that they would study the issue of trunk entrapment. I know that's not going to happen. We pushed and we did have a study that was with a group of people from the car companies, from toy companies, public health, you name it. It was a very good committee. They kind of had to invite me because I was the only one that had data. So it was put together as an expert panel on trunk entrapment. So that happened in Washington, DC.

We went through a series of meetings and then it was time to vote, "Were we going to suggest that trunk releases get added to vehicles?" I remember one of the favorite days in my whole life is when I was telling the group about what the objections were from the auto companies - there were two. One would say, "If there was a trunk release in, the criminal would become more aggressive and immobilize the person in the trunk, so they couldn't get out. Either that or they would cut off the trunk release so you couldn't get out." That didn't make sense. Again, I had read hundreds and hundreds of these cases by then. Like I said, one of my favorite days is when I said, "I just can't imagine how people have this information. Does somebody go to jail with a clipboard and say, 'What would you do if there was a trunk release in a vehicle?'" Because none of it made sense to me. But the reason it was my favorite day is because the gentleman from the FBI confirmed that what I was saying was correct and that there's no way to predict criminal behavior. So all of that was smoke and mirrors and everybody kind of bought into it for years and years because a letter had been written to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration as early as 1979, asking for trunk releases to be put in.

At that time, the then head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Joan Claybrook had written a letter to the car companies trying to find out why they're not doing this. And of course, they came back with, "Oh, that's criminal behavior. There's nothing we can do about that." But at the same time, when the head of NHTSA - the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration - writes a letter, it goes up to the highest echelons of their organization. So I have the notes from those meetings. Back in 1979, how much do you think it would have cost to add an internal trunk release to vehicles?

Scott

I don't know. It's a simple cable and a plastic handle, right? I mean, that's all that's involved, right? I mean, it shouldn't have been more than a few dollars - I would think \$5 or \$10.

Janette

No, it was considerably less than that. And again, this is another thing that just disappoints you to your core. They estimated at that time that, adding a trunk release to all the vehicles, would cost three cents per vehicle. Three cents!

Scott

That was the core of their objection then - that it would cost us money - right? I guess when you multiply it by the number of cars, it would come up to some dollars, but three cents to save somebody's life...

Janette

Just so you know, that's how the auto industry works - they would rather take a lawsuit here and a lawsuit there and settle it than prevent this from happening, and that's why it was so difficult to make change. They don't like to be told what to do. I'm sure people weren't writing thousands of letters saying, "Put it in a trunk release, put it in a trunk release." Because they didn't understand how prevalent that was. Obviously, this was something that needed to happen.

We worked through the situation and then it came to the point where we had to vote on where we were going to recommend that trunk releases to be added to all vehicles, and I thought we were home, we were there, and then, all of a sudden, the automaker started to turn on me, so to speak, and they said, "No, I don't think we need it. We don't need it." And I just went crazy. I said, "What?! You agreed with this in all of our previous meetings. Now you think you're going to vote against it?" And they said, "Well, we don't see that it's needed." And what actually turned it over to happening is I said, "Oh, that's fine. If you're not going to mandate these trunk releases, I want to let you know that I'm working with many different states and they are going to put in a regulation for trunk releases. You can send different cars to every state in the union that have trunk releases and that don't have trunk releases." Then, somebody spoke up and said, "Oh yeah, she's right. we're familiar with those lawsuits."

Scott

That would cost them a lot more than three cents.

Janette

It sure would, but it ended up we won by one vote. Of course, that night, we went out and celebrated, and actually had dinner with Ralph Nader, which was very exciting for me.

Scott

Yeah. He seems like he would be at the forefront of something like this as a consumer advocate.

Janette

Well, I think he knew what we were doing in the background but, like I said, that was just a wonderful privilege to see and meet and talk to him several times. But nothing could have been better than to celebrate with someone like that after a small little trunk release victory we had accomplished. There was a situation in 1998 and this is just about the same time as we're going to get going into this trunk entrapment expert panel. I was eight months pregnant. There were three different cases that happened in less than 30 days and it resulted in the death of 11 children. 11 children in less than 30 days died in the trunk of a car. I don't even know how the USA Today reporter found me because we had moved out of San Francisco. We were in a temporary home until we found our new home. She called and wanted to know about this trunk entrapment case. And I said, "Well, this is what's going on with that. What about the other two cases that happened?" And she went, "What are you talking about?" So I brought her up to speed, gave her all the information, and on Monday morning, that article hit the paper - 11 kids die within 30 days - and my phone would not stop ringing. It was within probably an hour, people were showing up on the door from NBC nightly news. There were calls from the Today Show,

CBS Morning Show, and Good Morning America. I needed to get on a plane and talk about this.

Scott

Because you were now seen as the expert in this area.

Janette

Oh, I was the only one who had the data and years of knowledge because nobody else had ever done this before and, of course, was able to talk down all those other crazy excuses that the auto industry and others were making. Yeah, it became national news very quickly and we were able to get the truth of the story out there, and not all these other excuses.

Scott

So by that time, you said the auto manufacturers had agreed to do it, but they weren't mandated by law yet. Is that correct?

Janette

Well, like I said, we won by one vote to suggest that NHTSA write the rule and it hadn't been written by then, but I think if they weren't going to write it with 11 children dying in 30 days, that put a tremendous amount of pressure on the agency to do something about that. In the past, when someone else might've wanted to accomplish this, they didn't have any data. One thing I've learned in this society is if there is no data, there is no problem, and that's what has been going on for years and years. So it really was the power of the data and being a survivor advocate that probably helped push this along much faster than other types of things we've been working to change.

Scott

So how long before it was actually required by law?

Janette

The regulation was written in 1999 and you always have to give the auto industry a couple of years to implement. So basically, all vehicles model year 2002 or newer had to have a glow-in-the-dark trunk release and it doesn't matter where on earth that vehicle is made. If it's sold or leased in the United States, it has to come with an internal glow-in-the-dark trunk release installed.

Scott

Yeah, I've seen them. They are that odd shade of green that, if it's dark, you're going to be able to see it.

Janette

Yeah. It's called phosphorescence.

Scott

So you got that accomplished. I mean, it's amazing that you kind of took that on as one person, but then you had the data and you had the story of being trapped, and then combined with the, I guess, timeliness of that one 30-day period where all those children didn't survive that. You were like an unstoppable force at that point.

Janette

Oh, absolutely. When something this life-changing happens to you, you do have a choice. You can curl up into a ball and never leave your house again. I went through those different, we'll say, stages of grieving, but probably the best one ever was the angry part. I was angry. I knew my life was never going to be the same and it did change the course of my life, but there was no way I was going to accept vehicles being made without a trunk release when it was so easy and so inexpensive, and it could save so many lives. Scott, this is the absolute best part of this whole story. It just makes my heart sing.

Because we continue to collect data on things like this that happened, it's not unusual for there to be a media story that says, "So-and-so got thrown in the trunk of their car. When they pulled in to get gas, they pulled that little glow-in-the-dark release and jumped out and their life was saved." All sorts of stories like that, which makes us very happy. But the best news is we have not been able to document one fatality in the trunk of a car that has that glow-in-the-dark release - I'm talking zero, zip, zilch, nada, none - and that, truly, is very rewarding.

Scott

I can imagine. Man, 100% effectiveness. That's so rare in any area. You're talking about saving people's lives. You got to be pretty proud of yourself.

Janette

Well, I'm very happy that we were able to reach this goal and have the peace of mind that nobody else has to go through what we did - being thrown in their own trunk, assaulted, left for dead, as I said, in my coffin on wheels. It's 2024. We shouldn't have these types of situations. It's so obvious what needed to be done.

Scott

You're working on some other projects. I mean, that's great. You got that accomplished. You reached your goal. You started this nonprofit. Can you tell us about that and what other things you're working on now?

Janette

Well, after this had happened, which is kind of rare, I guess— our organization at that time was called TRUNC, and it stood for Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition. We accomplished our mission, so I guess it was time to shut down, right? Well, that isn't what happened. Different people contacted me and said, "Oh, you should be working on how dangerous power windows are because they're strangling children. Well, you really need to work on kids knocking cars into gear and being killed." And I was like, "Hey, I just sort of wanted to get in trunk releases." But of course, at the same time, I realized they all fit in the same category as trunk entrapment, meaning that these are things that happen off the public road or highway and our government was not collecting any data about that. That's why I had to build my database about trunk entrapment. So here we go again.

I have this strong adage. If there's a problem and you don't do anything about it, you're part of the problem, and I wasn't going to be part of the problem. Build cases about people being strangled by power windows. Build cases about kids knocking cars into gear. So the new organization, Kids and Car Safety works on what we would call non-traffic incidents. Most people don't understand that every year, we hear 40,000 people die on our roads and highways. I mean, that is such a terrible number - over a hundred people a day are dying this way, and it's just one here, one there. So I guess it doesn't capture people's imagination when they realize a hundred people every day are being killed. But what they don't realize is that to get into that

database, 1) you have to be involved in a crash, 2) that crash needs to happen on a public road or highway, and 3) you have to die within 30 days of that incident. So there are all sorts of filters before that database is compiled and finalized.

Well, what about all this stuff that happens off the public road that isn't crash-related like trunk entrapment, people being backed over in parking lots or driveways? None of that was even being looked at. So that's where we took that challenge on and I'm happy to say we were able to get a regulation passed such that all vehicles, doesn't matter where in the world they're made, but they now come with a rear-view camera as standard equipment.

As I got more involved in this whole area, I was saying, "How come we've been making cars for a hundred years, and there's never been any standard as to what you should be able to see when you back up your car?" Then, as cars were getting bigger - SUVs and pickup trucks - that blind zone kept growing and growing. So 15 years later, I'm happy to say, through a tremendous amount of fighting, we were able to get that rear visibility standard and now everybody has a rear-view camera and you don't have to pay extra for it. It is standard equipment.

The other thing we were able to do was get safer power window switches because the old ones were, like, a rocker or a toggle. A little child might be in the car and want to wave to someone, and their knee would hit that little switch and the window would go up so quickly and with so much force that they couldn't even call out for help. So safer ones, you have to scoop up, we call them pull up and push down - that's the way those work. Also, now you have to have your foot on the brake before you can put your car into gear. So many hard-fought battles, but what these all had in common is our government was ignoring them because they didn't fit that criteria. We had to build the database and make sure people understood how often that happened and how preventable it can be, and work to get a standard so all vehicles would have those safety features as standard equipment.

Scott

This stuff is just common sense. I mean, you'd think if the auto manufacturers wanted to make their cars as safe as they possibly could, they would have come up with this stuff on their own. But I mean, is it accurate to say it all just comes down to cost - even if it's a tiny cost?

Janette

Usually. And not wanting to be told what to do. I mean, I can't tell you how many times people say, "Well, there ought to be a law. There ought to be a law." I said, "Yeah, let's work together. Let's do it." So that's sort of become our specialty - things that happen off the public road or highway. We were able to get a law passed for a regulation to be written for rear seat belt reminders. I mean, talk about a no-brainer. If you get in your car today and if you, as the driver or the passenger don't buckle up, you get the buzz. Why weren't there rear seat belt reminders in the back seat? We tell everybody to put their kids there because that's where it's safest but we don't have the same safety equipment back there.

The good news is we did get that law passed. The bad news is it still hasn't been written. The regulation is 15 years overdue. How can we let that happen? So we're fighting and fighting. It looks like that is going to happen, hopefully, before the end of the year. But 15 years of people dying who were sitting in the back seat and didn't have their seatbelts on? Do people realize that 50 to 60 percent of the people who die in vehicle crashes aren't belted at all or children aren't even in a car seat? Nobody likes that little buzz, but I do because, as soon as someone's

irritated by it, they buckle up so it'll turn off and then we've won. They may not realize it but they've won too.

Scott

Isn't it amazing that they won't buckle up to save their own life or their child's life or someone in the back seat, but they will because that little beeping is annoying, isn't it? It's a funny comment on human nature, I think

Janette

It is. And I'm sure there's been all sorts of studies on human factors and things like that - what motivate people. If that's all it takes to save lives, then let's do it.

Scott

For somebody listening to this now, what can people do to help you or to get these things moved along more quickly?

Janette

Well, something we are working on right now and have been working on literally for over 20 years is the fact that children unknowingly get left alone in vehicles or enter a vehicle on their own and that can result in a hot car death. We've been working and working to get this passed - what is called the Child Present Detection. We got the law passed but the regulation hasn't been written yet. We have documented that, since 1990, almost 1,100 children have died in a hot car. How can we let that continue if one or two children die because they've had some bad formula or even just get sick? The shelves are empty. Same with peanut butter and romaine lettuce. I think part of it is that people don't understand how this happens. They want to blame the parents, but that's not what is happening. We've got a neuroscientist we work with who explains very clearly what happens in our minds, especially when we go on autopilot. So we have a link on our website where people can go and say, "Get this finished. Nobody wants to see children die in a hawk car. Nobody."

Scott

And what is your website?

Janette

Our website is kidsandcars.org.

Scott

And if someone wants to contact you to volunteer or help or with a question, how should they get in touch with you?

Janette

Oh, please go to the website for a myriad of reasons. One is you can get a hold of us, but also you can learn and educate yourself about the dangers of trunk entrapment, power windows, kids knocking cars into gear, backovers, and now there are frontovers. Our cars have gotten so big, you can't see for eight to ten feet in front of your vehicle and nobody knows that.

Submersions is a problem that's continuing to gain. Then, car thefts with children left inside - that thing has just skyrocketed. We know that car thefts have gone up. Can you imagine how that gets racketed up when there's a child alone in a vehicle and a car is stolen? So there's all

sorts of information there that you can use, and that will help you protect your children, your family, and everyone you know.

Scott

And we'll have a link to that in the episode notes, so people can go there and get involved. This is the thing about public pressure that really what brings change, right?

Janette

That's one important element. Anything from survivor advocacy, lawsuits, to data and information, to passionate parents who we work with, who are willing to be stabbed over and over again after the most horrific situation in their life, having lost a child, but do it because they don't want another family to have to go through what they went through. They are our real heroes and we owe them all a great deal of thanks and appreciation.

Scott

You heard Janette mention some of the hero parents she works with to get these laws passed to keep kids safe. One of those people is Laura, who was on this podcast not long ago. Laura's life was turned upside down because of a hot car death, and she's working tirelessly with Janette to bring about the changes that are needed. Laura also has her own non-profit and podcast – I'll have links to all of those in the episode notes, at [WhatWasThatLike.com/172](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/172).

And as you probably know, I'm constantly at work putting together future episodes – whether it's new WWTL episodes, or bonus ones, or the weekly Tuesday Question episodes with Meredith – we're having a blast with that. I've always got a pipeline of guests – people with amazing stories, who are willing to come on the podcast and talk about it. I'm never worried about running out of content, that's for sure.

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

And now we're about to hear this week's Listener Story. Because that's what we do at the end of every episode – we play a 5-10 minute story that was sent in by a listener. And you know what? All of the other listeners are waiting to hear YOUR story. What are you waiting for? Just record it on your phone and email it to me – Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This week's story is from a listener who had a mishap on a mountain.

Stay safe! See you soon.

(Listener story)

Hello, Scott. My name is Jasmine and I am from Phoenix, Arizona. I was listening to episode 76 recently and it reminded me of a time when I took a spill down a mountain. It was March 10th, 2021, I believe, and it was my 30th birthday. So I took my 2 kids - one was 12, I believe, and one was 6. I took them to hike the mountain Picacho Peak with our 1-year-old lab pit bull, Olive. It took us about an hour and a half to get from our house to Picacho Peak. So we drove out there with just the kids, the dog, and myself because my husband was working, and we started to climb Picacho Peak. The kids are loving it. The dog is loving it.

But there was a woman out of the corner of my eye who was trying to approach my dog and I told her, "She's friendly, but she is shy. So please don't touch her." The woman proceeded to come closer and tried to touch the dog, Olive, and Olive freaked out and ran. I have her leash around my wrist, which I know better now— it was around my wrist and she just pulled me down the mountain.

We were maybe a little bit less than halfway up at this point and she was just pulling me further and further down. I've got dirt all over me. I am scraped beyond belief. I've got cactus in me and I can hear my kids just yelling from up higher on the mountain. I got my bearings back after what felt like forever, but I'm sure it wasn't very long at all. I stood up and I was making sure the dog was okay first, of course. Then, I took a look at myself and I was beaten up pretty badly. I am bleeding from my knees, my elbows, my arms, my legs.

When I looked back up the mountain, I saw my kids but I didn't see the lady who scared my dog anywhere. But in the end, I was okay - pretty beat up, like I said. We went to the gift shop afterward and I was able to get the kids something to calm them down and I drove the hour and a half home. When I got home, I was able to take a closer look at myself and pull all the cactus out of me. I had to throw away my pants because they were completely shredded. But it was still probably one of the best 30th birthdays because I have a story to tell and lots of scars still.

Thanks, Scott.