

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

OVER IN AN INSTANT

How can this happen?

Lives are shattered by accidental backovers while legislation languishes



Image 1 out of 4

Courtesy photo

By Susan Carroll

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Alone in the dark master bedroom, John Woodruff heard the click of the tumbler in the front door lock, and the quiet swoosh of the door opening. Not again, he thought, glancing at his wife's side of the king bed.

In Olinda's spot lay a bunched-up flannel blanket stuffed with their daughter Rebecca's favorite toys, with her Barbies, some Squinkies and a Lalaloopsy. Four-year-old Rebecca called them "My Girls." On good nights, the nights when Olinda came to bed, she would sleep with the plastic dolls tucked in the crook of her arm.

John rose and headed for the front door, knowing he would find his wife at the base of their sloping driveway, huddled on the concrete in her cotton, lavender pajamas. It was well after midnight as Olinda's sobs pierced the quiet of their Kingwood cul-de-sac. Her honey-brown eyes haunted and puffy, she touched the cold concrete, seeing blood stains that had been washed away weeks ago.



"How could I do this to you?"

John reached for his wife.

Olinda ignored him. She was talking to Rebecca.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

John had given up trying to convince Olinda that the accident was not her fault. In her mind, the facts were indisputable. She was Rebecca's mom. She was supposed to protect her. And she had backed over her baby girl with a 5,000-pound Ford Expedition.

At first, John had indulged Olinda's painful re-enactments of the accident, hoping she would realize it would have been impossible to see Rebecca in the gaping blind zone behind the family's SUV. Still, Olinda punished herself with morbid math equations, factoring in the height of the Ford's bumper, Rebecca's small stature, the palm tree that obstructed the view of the base of the driveway.

Olinda had to know: How did this happen? And what, if anything, could have saved Rebecca?

'How the hell'

Greg Gulbransen understands exactly how these accidents happen. A pediatrician in Oyster Bay, N.Y., Gulbransen brusquely recites the government statistics on backovers: Every week, nearly 40 children younger than age 5 are injured in backover accidents. On average, two of them die. Most are run over by a relative, often by a parent.

"Every single week," he says.

Children died after being backed over on a naval base in Kings Bay, Ga; on tribal land in Everson, Wash.; at a Bible camp in Fairmont, N.C.; in a mobile home park in San Antonio; in a cemetery in Dripping Springs, and at a beach in Corpus Christi. They were killed under a carport in South Houston, outside a stately brick home in northwest Houston and in the driveway of two volunteer firefighters in Liberty County.

The kids spent their last moments, before the crunch of tires and brakes, flying a kite, chasing a basketball, picking up a piggy bank, looking for a lost puppy, riding a toy tractor, a tricycle, a scooter. Infants as young as 10 months old crawled to their deaths, crushed in their driveways.

Many of the children were backed over by their own parents as they ran to get one more hug or kiss goodbye.

Gulbransen, 50, ticks off the names of four patients in his own, mid-sized practice who were backed over. Two of them lived. The other two died. One of them was Cameron. His son.

A decade after Gulbransen accidentally killed 2-year-old Cameron with a BMW SUV, he is unflinching in his recitation of the facts.

Cameron opened the front door of the family's condominium for the first time that autumn evening in 2002 and followed him outside. Gulbransen was only moving his wife's BMW a matter of feet: backing it from the street into a spot on the driveway. He checked his mirrors and put the vehicle in reverse, never realizing Cameron was toddling down the driveway as he backed up it. He felt a slight bump on the right side of the SUV and stepped out and saw Cameron on the driveway in his blue pajamas, holding his baby blanket. Blood seeped from his head.

Gulbransen hates this story, and yet he tells it over and over again, to the parents of his patients, to politicians, to the press. His message is clear: If this could happen to me, it could happen to anyone.

"I go to work and I tell everybody about vaccines, growth and development issues, and baby proofing ... and make sure all my patients have car seats. And then I go and back over my kid. Are you kidding me? Are you absolutely kidding me? How the hell?"

Months after Cameron's death, Gulbransen reached out to the automobile safety advocacy organization KidsAndCars.org and started pushing for better visibility behind vehicles. Gulbransen's congressman, Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., introduced a bill in Cameron's name in 2003 that would have required safety standards aimed at reducing backover accidents, but it ended up stuck in a committee.

As the years passed, Gulbransen and his wife made periodic trips to Washington, D.C., and spoke at press conferences with other parents who accidentally killed their children with their cars. Another attempt at a law failed in 2005.

Gulbransen finally got his law in 2007, after legislators brokered a compromise between automakers and safety advocates. Former President George W. Bush signed the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act on Feb. 28, 2008.

Cameron's law gave the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration three years to create regulations aimed at reducing injuries and deaths from backover accidents.

For a while, Gulbransen felt good. Cameron had a legacy.

'Born spunky'

Olinda, a CPA turned stay-at-home-mom, was pregnant with Rebecca when lawmakers debated Cameron's law in 2007. She never heard anything about it. With five kids and a sixth on the way, her days were a blur of soccer practices, swimming lessons, dance classes, Girl Scout meetings and football games.

The new baby meant she and John would need to trade in their Dodge Durango for an SUV that would seat eight. They settled on a Ford Expedition. Backup cameras were relatively rare in 2007.

To get a camera on the Expedition, they would have had to buy an upgraded package that cost thousands extra. It seemed extravagant to Olinda and to John, a tax attorney. So they went with the XLT.

As Olinda's belly grew, John worried about the new baby. Their last two boys spent weeks in neonatal intensive care after they were born. On June 13, 2007, a team of specialists assembled in the delivery room to greet Rebecca. They were quickly dismissed. She was perfectly healthy, 7 pounds, 2 ounces and 19.5 inches. "Born spunky," John liked to say.

At first, Olinda and John vowed to keep Rebecca out of their bed. They'd learned that lesson the hard way with their older kids. But at 4 months old, with an aching ear infection, Rebecca claimed

her spot between them, nestling into Olinda's arm with her soft, strawberry-blond hair. And there she slept, night after night, as she grew into an impish preschooler, resisting her parents' half-hearted attempts at eviction.

"Daddy, you go sleep with the boys!" she'd tease, kicking her feet.

"You little rat," he'd grumble. Then they'd play buzzy bee, where his finger was the bee, and she'd giggle and squeal.

Rebecca loved to dance, and she twirled around the house in frilly dresses, making sweeping circles until she collapsed. She could get anyone in the family to do almost anything with her. She got her sister, Maddy, to play Littlest Pet Shop and Squinkies with her. She persuaded her oldest brother, a high school football linebacker, to wear butterfly wings and pretend to be a fairy.

Sometimes John and Olinda struggled to discipline her. She once stuffed fries in her nose and snorted soda with a straw in a Chuy's Mexican restaurant to make her brothers and sisters laugh. John kept trying to get her to stop, but the way her cherub-like face contorted was too funny. He kept cracking up.

But he didn't hesitate to scold her when she ran out of their attached garage to greet him after work.

Cut it out, he told her. You're going to get hurt.

Cameras proposed

Cameron's law did not specify exactly how to improve visibility behind vehicles. Congress left that up to transportation officials to figure out through the government's complex regulatory system.

Scientists, researchers and economists studied data on backover accidents. They measured blind zones with lasers and safety cones. They tested cameras, mirrors, sensors and radar.

And in December 2010, transportation officials issued a proposed rule that would require all new automobiles to have backup cameras by September 2014. They estimated the cameras would save 95 to 112 lives a year.

Adding backup cameras to new vehicles would cost between \$58 and \$203, researchers estimated.

They multiplied that by 16.6 million new vehicles each year and calculated the price of standardizing cameras to be up to \$2.7 billion.

A cost-benefit analysis, required as part of the rule-making process, put the cost of each life saved at up to \$19.7 million. Transportation officials acknowledged it was a pricey proposal but said there were intangibles to consider, like the cost of backing over your own child. "Avoiding that horrible outcome is a significant benefit," they wrote.

Safety advocates were elated. Janette Fennell, founder of **KidsAndCars.org**, called it the most significant safety improvement since seat belts and air bags.

The auto industry balked. Its opposition, recorded in federal register comments, cited "significant additional cost per vehicle" and a series of technical concerns.

The Feb. 28, 2011, deadline for transportation officials to finalize the regulation came and went. Ray LaHood, the then-secretary of transportation, used his authority, written into Cameron's law, to postpone the deadline.

Within a week of the missed deadline, a father in Danville, Vt., backed over and killed his 2-year-old son. Five days later, another father in Portland, Ore., did the same to his boy. Five days after that, a grandmother in Alice, Texas, backed over her 3-year-old granddaughter as the girl looked for her lost puppy.

There was a cluster of dead children that March, seven within a week. They were parceled out every few days as spring turned to fall.

'I ran over Becca!'

On Oct. 21, 2011, Olinda heated up leftover spaghetti, Rebecca's favorite, for lunch. From her seat in the kitchen, Rebecca asked: "Mommy, when is grandpa going to die?" John's dad had been sick for a year or two then with lung cancer.

"I don't know, honey, whenever God decides to take him."

"Am I going to die, too?"

"No, you're little. You're going to live for a long, long time."

Rebecca picked at her spaghetti, then climbed down to play.

At 4:25 p.m., Olinda scooped up her keys. She needed to pick up Maddy from Girl Scouts. She figured she'd be gone about 10 minutes and put her 16-year-old daughter, Katie, in charge. Katie was helping her youngest brother, Andrew, 6, get ready for soccer practice.

Moments after Olinda left, Rebecca asked Nick, 8: "Where's Mommy? I want to tell her goodbye."

She's going to get Maddy from Girl Scouts, he said. When Rebecca started to run for the garage, he stopped her. You better go out the front door if you want to catch her, he said.

Olinda checked her mirrors, made sure the garage door was closed and then reversed the Expedition down the familiar slope of the driveway, deftly navigating its sharp, 90-degree turn. She felt a light bump two-thirds of the way down. She figured one of the neighbor's kids must have left a backpack or a scooter in the driveway. She looked up and saw Nick waving and yelling in the front yard, trying to get her attention. Olinda couldn't make out what he was screaming, so she rolled down the window: "Becca! Becca!"

Olinda hit the brakes, thinking Rebecca wanted to come with her. She's behind you! Nick yelled.

Olinda opened her car door to load Rebecca into her car seat. Then she saw her on the driveway.

Blood pooled around her, gushing from her mouth and nose.

Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.

Olinda scooped Rebecca up in her arms and ran inside to get the phone to call 911. She ran back outside with Rebecca in one arm and the phone in the other. She dialed 911. She yelled to Nick to get some towels.

Rebecca was still breathing, trying to talk. Olinda wiped away the blood with the towels, but it did not stop.

Olinda called John. He was in Denver for an American Bar Association tax committee meeting, mingling in a hallway outside a conference room with several partners in his firm. The first two times his cellphone rang, he saw it was Olinda and ignored it, figuring he could call her back. But with the third call, he excused himself to answer the phone.

"I ran over Becca!"

"What?"

"She ran out behind the car and I ran over her!"

Olinda said they were taking her to the hospital on a Life Flight helicopter. A neighbor drove Olinda to Memorial Hermann Hospital as John sped to the Denver airport.

At the airport, John rushed to the United Airlines ticket counter and begged to be put on the next flight. Then he fought his way through the security line.

Olinda and her neighbor were ushered into a hospital room where a chaplain and an organ donor sponsor were waiting. Olinda felt sick. The doctor came in.

"Is she going to be OK?"

The doctor didn't answer.

"Is she going to die?"

He didn't answer.

"She already died?"

"Yes," he replied.

Olinda called John again, bawling. He answered his phone in the security line. The connection was bad; the phone kept cutting out. But he understood.

John felt as if his lungs were collapsing inside his chest. He showed the agent his ID, removed his shoes, put them in the bin. He did the same with his laptop. He boarded the plane. It felt stuffy, claustrophobic. He pulled out the laptop and started typing, trying to stifle his sobs.

We called you "Always Baby. When you told mommy you were getting big, she said "you'll always be my baby." And you loved your mommy so much that you named yourself Always Baby just to make her happy. You had a hundred loving nicknames like "Little Girl," "Fickle Pickle," "Rebecca Cheeks," "Moon Monkey," but Always Baby said it all ...

A tragic accident

Warren Diepraam, a veteran vehicular crimes prosecutor with two decades of working in Harris and Montgomery counties, dreads the cases involving parents who back over their kids.

"You can see the devastation in their faces," he said of the parents. "And you know they are never going to recover from it."

He's only prosecuted one backover case in nearly 20 years involving a parent who was not drunk or high on drugs. A mother placed her infant daughter behind an SUV, assuming the father would pick her up and put her in the vehicle. He didn't see the baby and killed her. A court gave the mom four

years of probation.

Most of the cases are quickly closed, like Rebecca's. Houston police interviewed Olinda and her neighbors. They mapped the driveway and drew Olinda's blood. And when everything checked out, they labeled Rebecca's death a "tragic accident." They told Olinda she was free to go home, to the last place on Earth she wanted to go.

'Jesus have mercy'

Rebecca's funeral at the Methodist church started late because Olinda could not bear to close the pearl-white coffin trimmed with pink bows. She talked to Rebecca and brushed her ringlets. She held her dimpled hand, wrapped around a Polly Pocket doll.

The pastor asked Olinda if he could say a prayer. We trust now and believe that Becca is laughing and dancing with Jesus, he said.

As he spoke, Olinda had a vision of Jesus scooping up Rebecca and throwing her into the air, like John had done many times.

OK, she said. It's OK to close the coffin.

The funeral opened with a video of Rebecca in a white dress twirling in circles. John read Rebecca the letter he wrote on the plane: "I'd give the universe for one more super tight hug with your pretty little head buried deep in my neck," he said.

After they buried Rebecca, Olinda barely functioned. She relived the 911 call over and over again. "I ran over my baby! I need an ambulance!"

A psychologist recommended she be hospitalized, but she refused. She saw one doctor, and then another. She was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Every time Olinda drifted off to sleep, she saw Rebecca bleeding on the driveway.

"Jesus have mercy," she whispered. "Jesus have mercy."

They buried John's dad a week after Rebecca. John struggled to hold everything together. "The other kids need you," he told Olinda.

Night after night, as winter deepened, Olinda slipped out of the house, shivering on the driveway in her pajamas, punishing herself.

She tried to break the cycle of second-guessing, but she had so many questions. Why did Rebecca run out the front door? She'd never done that before. What if the car windows had been down, not up, and she could have heard Nick screaming? What if they had splurged on a backup camera?

John studied the statistics on backovers and read up on backup cameras. He and Olinda and Olinda's sister re-enacted the accident on the driveway with a rented Ford Expedition equipped with a camera, just to see. "Maybe there would have been just enough of a glimpse for a split second for her to stop," John said. "Maybe."

"Even if it makes a difference in 40 percent of the cases, 20 percent of the cases ..." he trails off. "I mean, to keep a family from going through this."

As an afterthought, John adds: "What are the arguments against it? Money?"

Lobbyists weigh in

Next door to the White House, tucked inside a corner of the granite-walled Old Executive Office Building, is a powerful but little-known agency that reviews the nation's most significant regulatory actions.

The Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, which reports to the president, is responsible for deciding whether the benefits of a proposed rule outweigh its cost. Executive orders limit the review period to 120 days, but some regulations have languished for years.

On Nov. 16, 2011, less than a month after Rebecca died, the proposed regulation underpinning Cameron's law moved to this office.

Three weeks later, regulatory and transportation officials met with safety advocates and parents of dead children, who pushed them to release the rule. Eight days after that, government officials sat down with a trio of lobbyists from Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents automakers including BMW, Chrysler, Ford and General Motors.

The lobbyists declined interview requests, but documents they brought to the meeting and provided to the White House highlighted cheaper alternatives to standard backup cameras, including equipping some vehicles with additional mirrors.

The regulation stalled.

The deadline, already extended once, came and went in December 2011. Secretary LaHood announced a delay in January 2012 and another the following month, pushing the deadline out until

the end of the year.

Days after the missed January deadline, a father in California backed over his 1-year-old daughter before church. In February, a Dallas mom reversed her Suburban over her 4-year-old son as he bent down to pick up a box. Dozens died as spring stretched into summer. In September, a father accidentally backed over his 3-year-old daughter on their northwest Houston driveway.

The December 2012 deadline passed quietly.

Choice vs. mandate

As the fifth anniversary of the signing of Cameron's law approached, Gulbransen wrote a letter to President Barack Obama, warning that the delays were costing lives. Parents who backed over their children returned to the Capitol for another tearful press conference, holding pictures of their dead sons and daughters.

"It's inexcusable that we haven't done anything," Rep. Jan Schakowsky, the Democrat from Illinois who co-sponsored the bill, said at the press conference.

Auto industry lobbyists argued that cameras should be a consumer choice, not a government mandate. Roughly one-in-three new cars sold in 2013 had a camera, the research firm IHS Automotive estimated.

"Automakers are providing cameras in cars today for greater vision and for new driver assists, and consumers should decide which of these technologies they want to buy," Wade Newton, a spokesman with the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, said in a statement.

On June 20, 582 days after the proposed rule arrived at the regulatory office, transportation officials withdrew it. LaHood pushed the deadline back another 18 months — until January 2015.

Transportation officials said in a statement "further study and data analysis are needed to ensure the most protective and efficient rule possible."

Regulatory officials referred a reporter to the Department of Transportation. LaHood, who stepped down July 2, did not return phone calls. His replacement and other transportation officials declined interview requests.

If the government meets its January 2015 deadline for a final rule, automakers would have two years by law to implement the new safety requirements, meaning they likely would not be fully in effect until 2017.

A slow healing

Olinda eventually stopped going down to the driveway at night. The brown, flannel blanket that held Rebecca's favorite plastic dolls, the one that covered Rebecca's body at the hospital, now rests by the side of the bed. "It was kind of ugly," Olinda said. "But it smelled like her."

She hasn't been inside Rebecca's room for six months. The thought of it makes her cry.

She and John attended Rebecca's preschool graduation at the Methodist church where her funeral was held. The teachers laid out a graduation gown on a small, empty chair, and placed a yellow rose on it.

Outside Rebecca's classroom, the teachers and other parents planted a memorial garden with a plaque and pink roses and a butterfly bush. At the center of the garden is a rare Chinese fringe tree with glossy green leaves and clusters of snowy blossoms.

Sometimes, Olinda sits on the bench there and stares at Rebecca's tree. In the right light, with a gentle breeze, it looks like it is dancing.

Timeline: [Why all the delays in regulation?](#)

Database: [Search for cars equipped with rearview cameras](#)

Photo gallery on chron.com: [Cars under \\$30,000 with rearview cameras](#)

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