

SAMIRA'S DEATH AND JJ'S NEAR-DROWNING

Samira Riggsbee was two; her brother JJ a year younger. On July 14, 1978, the Riggsbees left their children with a teen-aged babysitter, to share a quiet dinner alone. Later, the babysitter felt ill and went to the bathroom, leaving Samira and JJ in the family room. She returned in fifteen minutes; the sliding glass door was open. Both children were floating face down in the pool. A neighbor heard her scream, called 911 and summoned the Riggsbees. When they arrived at the hospital, a nurse and firefighter wouldn't make eye contact. Samira was dead. JJ was in critical condition.

THROUGH GRIEF TO ADVOCACY

JJ's brain was severely injured. Nadina stayed at the hospital for four months, unable to go home to an empty house. It became clear that JJ would be severely disabled. After seven months, she looked unsuccessfully for a "place" for him. In June, 1979, she decided to take him home, the youngest child ever to go home with that level of disability.

JJ had a tracheal tube, quadriplegia, severe brain damage, and need for around the clock care. Nadina's time was consumed by JJ and her newborn son Eric. She bore two more children in quick succession. As JJ grew older, she fought every step of the way for him to be in school. Since 1979, Nadina's advocacy skills have been finely honed by working with hospital, health care and school bureaucracies on JJ's behalf. JJ is now 24.

Drowning prevention became her other passion. In 1980 Nadina began to study the problem. She found that drowning was the leading cause of all deaths in California's children ages 1-4 years. When she asked a doctor why no one did anything about drowning, she was told, "nobody has bothered".

She "bothered". She advocated environmental protection, primarily mandatory four-sided fencing of residential swimming pools. In 1982, she attended a luncheon, where the guest speaker was a member of the Board of Supervisors for Contra Costa County. She moved the seating cards at his table so that she could sit next to him, to educate him about pool fencing.

She organized families of drowning victims to testify at Board of Supervisors meetings. For a full year, the pool industry lobbyists fought hard in opposition to fencing requirements. Before a key vote, a local newspaper ran a story about drowning and the problem of 'negligent parents'. But she and her co-workers prevailed.

In 1983, the swimming pool ordinance was passed, effective November 1984. Contra Costa County was the first jurisdiction to pass a residential swimming pool ordinance, setting national precedence. However, it covered only the unincorporated areas of the county.

In 1985 she created the Drowning Prevention Foundation, a non-profit agency which works to create awareness and advocate for policy change to prevent childhood drowning. That year, she met with a commissioner of the Consumer Product Safety Commission in Washington, DC, who at first argued that a pool was not a 'product.' Since then, CPSC has been a valuable partner in advocating 4-sided fencing for residential swimming pools.

Her foundation was a sponsor of California's 1996 Swimming Pool Act, which requires that all home swimming pools built in or after 1998 comply with safety standards for swimming pool enclosures, safety pool covers, or exit alarms. The "or" bothers her. She is a "fence lady", believing that alarms are ineffective, but an easy way to satisfy the building code.

Nadina also educates the public. She has produced educational brochures for pediatricians' offices, preschools, and libraries. Every year, California's governor names May as Drowning Prevention Month. For the past 13 years, Safeway grocery stores nationally have put drowning prevention messages on their paper bags for that month.

Nadina's advocacy goes beyond pool drownings. Children love to play in water. Drownings happen in spas, bathtubs, barrels, 5-gallon pails - any place where water can cover a child's nose and mouth. She is concerned about the use of bathtub ring devices for young children. The bottom suction cups can come loose, children push up, fall forward and drown. She knows of at least 85 drowning deaths due to use of bathtub rings. In July, 2000 her foundation submitted a petition to CPSC to get these devices off of the market.

Nadina has been frustrated by lack of funding for 20 years. She did have a small contract with the Contra Costa county health department to work with other cities on pool fencing ordinances, and the State Farm Insurance and Pacific Life funded the brochures. But she was unsuccessful competing against other health departments for a grant. They want her help - but they "contact", not "contract". She questions why most money for prevention goes to county health departments for programs or to scientists for research, not to the important advocacy work of nonprofit organizations.

Nadina knows profoundly the toll that childhood drowning exacts. Her marriage ended in divorce, as do many marriages when there is a death or brain damage of a child. But she continues her care of JJ and drowning prevention. She has testified as an expert witness in cases involving drowning. She serves on many committees, and is the Chair of the Drowning Prevention Committee of California's Children's Health and Safety Coalitions. She assists other jurisdictions "as needed" as an advocate for fencing ordinances, meeting with building code officials, and helping to implement local educational programs. She is now running for the Danville Town Council.

WAYS TO CONTACT/CONTRIBUTE

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