

Missing-child story has a happy ending

This month, we are featuring a guest column by a neighbor of Del McCaulay. This is a true story.

By Erika Ginsberg-Klemmt
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My son went missing one recent night. If I had a worst enemy, maybe I would wish for them to live through such a nightmare. Then again, if I had a worst enemy, someone I'm afraid of or distrustful of, it might not have happened in the first place.

Our part of South Gate feels like such a safe area. We have few rules, an open-door policy, and our kids are free to run around in their underwear or bathing suit, barefoot down at the creek, or jumping on the trampoline, or climbing in the tree house, or spontaneously visiting a neighbor.

Some parents rarely allow their kids out of their line of vision or earshot. At a playground, my easy-going circle of mothers might identify the "helicopter moms," always hovering over their child, micro-managing their every move. Whether for selfish, lazy reasons or on principle, I've always given my kids free rein and rarely got involved with their agenda.

More than once, beach lifeguards have had to drag my wandering toddler back to me. "We found her wa-a-a-y down the beach, ma'am," I've heard on more than one occasion. I'm always thankful and somewhat mortified, but even then somewhere in the back of my head I'm thinking, "She would have come back on her own."

It was this unworried posture I took for the first hour of my son's disappearance. He'd certainly resurface, he's off discovering the world as he should, I thought. I sent my 9-year-old daughter to go looking for him at the neighbors' house. Not there? Try the other neighbor. Still not there? Hmm... did you try the neighbor down the street, there?

Now it was 8 p.m. and beginning to get dark. This was the moment that the same wise, always-concerned daughter mentioned something to me that converted my calm, happy-go-lucky attitude to one of dread and desperation: "Mom, I saw the same car drive by here . . . twice."

Now, why should a car driving in front of the house twice give me the creeps? I'm not sure, but suddenly the vision of my poor son being dragged into the back of a Suburban flooded my synapses. I looked outside; his bike and helmet were there. I scoured the house, every

Beautiful Sarasota

By DEL MACAULAY

corner and closet where he might hide, threatening him in loud bellows that if he didn't show up, there would be consequences. No avail. We screamed his name down at the creek and up on the streets and everywhere between. On the way back

from one last neighbor check, my fingers found their last bastion of sanity: 9-1-1.

It amazed and saddened me to realize that I couldn't describe to the police what my 7-year-old was wearing when he disappeared about 90 minutes ago. I was ready to say in his underwear; I had this vague memory of something unusual in his attire but could offer no particulars. I answered their questions with utter disbelief that this was happening and found myself suddenly choking back the tears.

The dispatcher was as helpful as could be in the circumstances, and I didn't make his job much easier.

"You get missing kid reports all the time, right?" If he said yes, then I had reason to be worried, and if he

said no, then I had reason to be VERY worried.

"We have someone going right out to you; I'll stay on the line with you until they arrive," which was immediately. "We also have a helicopter on standby if necessary."

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amazing support system and already felt a sense of gratefulness. Whatever the fate of my son would be, I wasn't in it alone. The men and women in uniforms were professional, concerned and ready to jump. Where would we start?

Well, we started with the little boy coming out of the house, rubbing his tired eyes, wearing nothing but a pair of purple dance tights.

"What's going on? I was sleeping!" he announced.

The mix of relief and embarrassment was neutralized by the friendly, unpatronizing response of the officers, who were just happy that the case was closed. They smiled, mussed up his already mussed-up hair and went on their way, having done their job.

I have a missing kid file in case one of my three disappears. Each card has a space for their fingerprints, a recent photo and a lock of hair. Don't wait to fill in the darn card, just in case.

And next time, even if you've screamed their name through the whole house, check under the covers of your bed.