

Pool Safety: A Cautionary Tale

'Well, Ma'am,' They Told Her, 'Accidents Can Happen'

By LISA ST. JOHN

WHEN my husband wanted to buy a Westchester house with a pool, I was afraid it would be too dangerous and insisted on a childproof fence. Despite the airy playroom, the sunlit patio that opened to a lush backyard, I argued in vain against buying it. He held my hands and asked me to have vision.

I picked up the phone and called pool fence companies; I tried to decipher differences in construction of the types of fences.

One employee gave me the number of satisfied customers, pool owners like himself, who assured me of the stability and safety of their choices.

For each one, I had the same question: "Can you guarantee that your fence is safe, completely child-proof?"

Always the same answer.

"Well, Ma'am, accidents can happen."

The following June after the pool was opened and 75 feet of fiber mesh fencing had been installed, a scream broke through the morning. The sound shot through every pore of skin. Through the bedroom window I watched my husband carrying our toddler, Burke, over his shoulder screaming for help. I raced down the hardwood stairs to call an ambulance.

My husband laid our unconscious child down on the beige carpet and administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation, right there in that airy playroom, the room adjacent to the sunlit patio, which led outside to a manicured path, which wound around a fence, which encircled the

bluest pool.

Seconds before our baby son had been floating face down in his diaper and sandals in the deep end. The mouth of the fence's gate swung wide open.

Emergency medical workers arrived, swooped down to the child's blue body and wrapped him in layers of warm blankets. Our older children, Jenny and Luke, fled into the reassuring arms of their grandmother, who had just arrived. My husband



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followed the emergency technician who held our child in his arms, into the back of the ambulance. I followed in a police escort car.

I thought I had done everything right. For five or even 10 minutes my husband and I each thought the other had our toddler. And despite the fence and conversations about pool safety, despite everything we had done to ensure the safety of our children, our youngest child had wandered inside toward the pool.

Burke is 15 now. Recently, while sitting in the waiting room of our local hospital in radiology a nurse approached me.

"Are you Mrs. St. John?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, standing up.

"I saw your son's name on the schedule and wondered if it was actually him," she said, as tears filled her eyes.

"I was on duty the morning they brought him into the E.R.," she said. "I just passed him in the hallway. He's so handsome and big."

I told her: "We're here to rule out a herniated disk in his neck. You know he's a football player and wrestler."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" she said. "It's rare that we get to see them as they grow. Most don't make it."

Then I told her the story about tucking Burke into bed one night, a year after the accident.

"Mommy, remember when Grandpa and I flew over the pool and I was swimming?"

My father had died before Burke was born so I assumed he was referring to his other grandfather.

"You mean Grandpa Jud?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "Your daddy. Grandpa Don."

In the car on the way home from the hospital, my son asked me again to relate the details of his near drowning. I told him how his father had saved him by giving him CPR on the living room rug. How we were told that he would die. How, hours later, we were informed that he would most likely live without brain function. How his 2-year-old body had fought like a gladiator.

"They had to strap your arms and legs down," I said.

I told him how an angel had been on the scene, when I had not.

"Grandpa," he said.

When my car approached our mailbox, Burke asked to drive up the driveway. I reminded him that there would be much time for driving, but he persisted.

"Mom, come on. I'm 15."

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