

## *Growing Up In Gaithersburg*

By Marien Helz

### **Children and Safety in Gaithersburg**



Several years ago when I was walking around Kentlands and Lakelands as I do whenever I'm here, I saw three boys who had just gotten a free ride in a limousine. The boys, ranging in age from about seven to nine, were ecstatic that the limo driver whom they didn't know had given them a ride. They were enthusiastically telling two adults standing on a porch about all the wonderful gadgets the limousine had and were expecting the adults to share in their excitement. As the boys were joyfully describing the ride, the man and woman were gazing toward the limo with dumbfounded expressions on their faces which indicated that they felt as horrified as I did.

I don't know whether the adults were the parents of one of the boys, but it was clear that they knew them. Whoever the parents were, I'd be willing to bet that they had often said to the children, "Never take rides from strangers."

In the city of Buffalo, when my son was six years old, he was one day playing in our yard with other children. Five minutes after I had checked on them,



the yard was quiet, and I looked out to see the children vanished. Under the circumstances, I felt—and remain convinced to this day—that he was in grave danger. Although I had no idea where he had gone or with whom, with quick action and luck, I was able to retrieve him within half an hour even though the people he was with tried to hide him from me.

My son knew that he was never allowed to go anywhere—not even next door at the age of six—without asking us first. He had never gone off before. Yet as I was walking back home with his hand locked safely in my own, he told me that he had sort of remembered that there was something he was supposed to do, but he hadn't been able to remember what it was.



It was one of those times when you simultaneously want to hug them and hit them.

I could have lost that day my tousle haired, blue-eyed boy forever.

My son is now twenty-six and married. This does not stop me from wondering, however, how we can keep our collective children safe.

When I was growing up in Gaithersburg, the world was a far safer place than now. None-the-less, parents had the same worries. The rules were recited

repeatedly: *Never accept rides from strangers...Never take candy from strangers.* Yet when I was about seven, several elderly people from the Asbury Home were walking down Maryland Avenue where we lived, and one of the men in the group wanted to give us candy. We refused, but he was insistent that we should have some and dumped pieces into containers fastened to our bicycles.

My brother and sister dumped theirs out. I ate a piece. Of course, I had made a judgment call that turned out to be right—the people were from “The Old Folks Home” nearby and had the demeanor of grandparents. Still, we would like children not to make such judgment calls because the consequences can be too serious if they are mistaken.

On another occasion, I broke the *Don't accept rides* rule. I was walking alone the three quarters of a mile from my house to the elementary school on Summit Avenue. It was bitterly cold, and a man in a pickup truck asked me if I wanted a ride. Although I didn't know him, I did know the other children in the vehicle. They were a year older than I, and I thought that he was probably the father of one of them. I must have stood there in the biting wind for a full minute before I accepted the ride. [I was also breaking another rule that applied only to our family—you're supposed to walk to school regardless of the weather, not ride. Walking is good for you.]

It saddens me, as it must everyone, that Gaithersburg, like most places, is not as safe now as it was then, and that the odds of a child breaking a rule and things turning out all right have diminished. Probably the point to realize is that parents and teachers need to repeat the rules more often than one expects and to be aware that children are not able to internalize and adhere to regulations as early as we wish.