

PARENTS TALK BACK

The awkward question that could save your child’s life

Editor’s note: This is the first in a two-part series on children and guns.

Whenever a child comes to my house for the first time, I make a point to ask the parent if the child has any food allergies.

If the child did have a life-threatening allergy, the parent would probably offer that information unprompted. But it’s become such a part of the parenting culture to inquire — a prerequisite for playdates or sleepovers.

Statistically speaking, however, a child is more likely to be accidentally shot and killed by a firearm than die of an allergic reaction to a peanut. And yet the conversation about guns among friends, neighbors and relatives has not become as routine.

While food allergies have been internalized as a public risk and childhood epidemic, the same cannot be said about guns.

More than 3,000 children and teens, up to age 19, are shot unintentionally each year on average, according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

In 2013, there were 108 accidental firearm deaths for those 18 years old and younger, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC does not specifically track peanut allergy deaths, but recorded 21 food allergy-related deaths — children and adults — in that same year.

When looking at the totality of all firearm-related deaths for children and teens — not just accidental ones — the number is obviously much higher.

In 2010, there were 2,711 infant, child and teen firearm deaths. Writer Evan DeFilippis put this in perspective in an essay about the impact of firearms on children: “More American children and teenagers died from gunfire in 2010 — a single year — than U.S. troops in Afghanistan since 2001.”

Has any parent ever asked me if we have a firearm in the house before entrusting me with their child? No. I’ve hosted countless children, and I’ve never been asked that question.

Catherine Mortensen, a spokeswoman for the National Rifle Association and mother of a 17-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, says she and her husband have been gun owners since before their children were born. Their children have grown up shooting and are comfortable around firearms.

“I’ve never had a parent ask” about how their weapons are secured, she said.

But she wouldn’t be offended if anyone did, she added. “I would tell them the truth: We do have firearms in the home. They are safely stored in a safe away from the children. They are inaccessible.”

Becky Morgan of St. Louis also has two teenagers, and is the Missouri chapter lead for Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. She said that recent high-profile news stories about accidental shooting deaths prompted her to ask the parents of her children’s friends about firearms.

“You don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings and you don’t want to make anyone feel uncomfortable,” she said. “But I would hate for something to happen, and I didn’t ask because I was uncomfortable.”

So far, every conversation she has had on the topic has gone smoothly. None of the parents she’s talked to have owned a firearm, which makes the follow-up much easier for her. She said if she did encounter a family with guns in the house, she would ask to have the friend come visit at her home instead.

While the NRA says it’s a personal decision for gun owners to decide how to store guns, they do advise keeping firearms “inaccessible to unauthorized users,” Mortensen said.

The way to reduce the risk of children and teen gun deaths is to store guns unloaded and locked, and to store ammunition separately, also locked. And teach your kids these simple instructions if they ever encounter a firearm: Assume it’s loaded. Don’t touch it. Leave the area and tell an adult immediately.

The topic falls naturally into a wider conversation about safety concerns, said Danielle Alperin, program manager at the Brady Center.

“It’s something we’ve found people kind of worry might be uncomfortable or awkward, but it could save a child’s life,” she said. Plus, their research found there’s little if any resistance among gun owners to these questions. A responsible gun owner will want to tell you it’s safely stored.

Once a parent has that information, it’s up to them to decide how to act on it, depending on their comfort level, she said.

I’ve had to ask a close family member and longtime friends about their gun storage, after learning that the families owned guns. I do believe the people in my life who keep firearms in their homes are responsible adults who would do anything to keep their children, and my own, safe.

But I’ve decided that if I can casually ask about lethal peanuts, I can ask a few direct questions about a weapon designed to kill.

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AISHA SULTAN
Parents talk back

HERMISTON

Stolen class ring returned after 20 years

By MAEGAN MURRAY
EO Media Group

Hermiston High School class of 1987 graduate Lisa Merrifield thought her HHS class ring was gone forever after it was stolen more than 20 years ago.

Merrifield, who now lives in New Hampshire, said she left her class ring, along with her wedding ring and other jewelry, in her purse in her car while playing in a local softball game in 1992 or 1993. When she returned to the car later that day, she discovered it had been broken into and her purse and its contents, including her class ring, were gone.

She assumed they were gone forever.

Then a couple of weeks ago Merrifield received a Facebook message from Hermiston School District librarian Delia Wallis asking if her initials in high school were LKB and if she was missing her class ring.

Wallis had received a call from Carol Cima in Portland, whose son-in-law Luis Rodriguez had found the ring in one of the vehicles at his job at a wrecking yard in Portland. He decided to take it home with him, knowing that someone would potentially want it back.

“He brought these things home and showed them to my daughter,” Cima said. “He said, ‘You know, seems like somebody would want that.’ He said, ‘My mom is a good detective and might be able to find out who it belongs to and how it ended up there.’”

Cima said she had the ring for a few weeks, trying to figure out how she would locate the owner, but eventually forgot about it. When she was going through some things last month, she found the ring once again. Cima tried to log onto classmates.com and other reunion websites to search for the owner based on the engraved initials LKB on the inside, but had no luck.

“I ended up calling the high school, and the lady in the main office at Hermiston transferred me to Delia Wallis,” she said,



Contributed photo

Hermiston High School class of 1987 graduate Lisa Merrifield poses for a picture with her class ring after it was returned to her from Portland resident Carol Cima.

because the librarian had access to past yearbooks.

Wallis said she located Merrifield after speaking with some of her friends who graduated from Hermiston High School who had younger siblings who were Merrifield’s age. Wallis herself had graduated from Hermiston High School a few years before Merrifield. Wallis said all of her friends’ siblings confirmed that Merrifield, whose maiden name was Ballard in high school, was the only person they knew of with the initials LKB.

“I looked her up in the year book, and she was wearing the ring,” Wallis said. “I knew it had to be her.”

Merrifield said when she heard from Cima, she couldn’t help but be filled with joy. She said the ring had been purchased for her by her mother who passed away last year. She said she will cherish the ring even more knowing that her mother purchased it for her.

“I remember when I got the class ring,” Merrifield said. “My mother wanted me to have some things to remember my high school years. Now, it is



Maegan Murray photo

Hermiston School District librarian Delia Wallis helped Portland resident Carol Cima locate the owner of a 1987 Hermiston High School class ring that had the letters LKB engraved on it. The ring has since been returned to original owner Lisa Merrifield, whose maiden name was Ballard.

OUT OF THE VAULT

Search for Birch Creek treasure yields more questions than gold

Tales of buried treasure usually bring images of dashing pirates, tropical islands and gold doubloons. But even in the dusty scrub of Eastern Oregon, the lure of finding a cache of hidden booty has led to myth and legend.

One such story graced the pages of the *East Oregonian* on April 23, 1906. Local legend in the Pilot Rock area suggested a man had buried a fortune in 1864 while he lived on the Wilson place, formerly the “Skeedaddle” Smith ranch, south of Pilot Rock on Birch Creek. The man kept secret the location of his treasure until his death bed, when he divulged that he had buried an iron box containing \$11,000 in gold dust and coins when he lived on the ranch. But because he had lived in several places, all efforts to find the gold came to nothing.

Enter J.H. Anderson, a



RENEE STRUTHERS
Out of the vault

storekeeper in the tiny town of Monument. Having heard the rumor of buried treasure, the story said, he traveled to Birch Creek and learned of the location of the old house

on the Wilson place from Marion Smith, who had formerly lived there. The house had stood where the old emigrant road crossed the creek and, while the house had been gone for more than 20 years, a depression in the ground showed where the cellar had been — and it was there that Anderson started digging.

Anderson turned up in Pilot Rock that evening and at supper seemed very excited, though he didn’t talk about the day’s adventure. He returned

home to Monument the next morning. The owner of the ranch, Mr. Wilson, went to the old homestead the next day to see what Anderson was up to. He found an iron box with the lid broken off beside one of three holes dug in the ground where the cellar had been. Locals figured Anderson was successful in his search for the legendary treasure.

But on May 10, the *EO* followed up the story with a denial by Anderson, who said the box contained nothing but a rusty mule shoe and a corroded ox bell, probably relics of the old emigrant days of 1851. Anderson said the home where the box was found was once the home of his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. J.S. Wilson, and he had spent time there during his boyhood. On one occasion, during the early mining days around 1865, his grandmother sent him to the cellar to level the dirt floor. In

one corner Anderson found a spot that was higher than the rest, and he uncovered a large can containing an unknown amount of money. Fearing (as imaginative boys will) that an outlaw might force him to reveal the location of the cache, or kill him if he refused, Anderson reburied the can and told no one of his find.

Anderson said he had often wanted to revisit the old homestead and look for the buried gold, and that he made no secret of his discovery and his wish to return since moving to Monument in 1900.

Did Anderson find the hidden gold? His actions seem to point to his success, though certainly he saved himself some grief by his denial.

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ODDS & ENDS

Family celebrating one-month birthdays of identical triplets

ST. CLAIR SHORES, Mich. (AP) — A suburban Detroit couple who have two older children are adjusting to life after becoming parents to identical triplets — a multiple birth that’s rare.

The Whiteley family of St. Clair Shores celebrated the one-month birthdays Wednesday for Alexander, Nicholas and Timothy. The brothers were born Jan. 25 at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, but spent nearly a month in the newborn intensive care unit.

The boys are healthy, their mother Lauren Whiteley said. Their older brothers are age 3 and 2.

“I always wanted a big family, and I guess this is the way to do it, get them all at once,” Whiteley joked.

Many triplets are the result of fertility treatments, but Lauren Whiteley, 32, said she didn’t take fertility drugs. She had an ultrasound at about eight or nine weeks to confirm the pregnancy, but didn’t know what she was seeing.



AP Photo/Paul Sancya

Identical triplets Alexander, Nicholas and Timothy Whiteley, left to right, sleep at their home in St. Clair Shores, Mich., Wednesday. The boys were born at 34 weeks via C-section on Jan. 25. About 4,300 triplet births are recorded each year in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But these births are rarer because the triplets were conceived naturally, without fertility drugs.

“It was the ultrasound tech that kind of left the room, came back and I thought something was wrong,” Whiteley said. “She said ‘No it’s good news.’ I said ‘Oh my gosh! It’s twins,

isn’t it?’ She said, ‘No, I see three.’ This was the shock of a lifetime.”

Michael Whiteley, 31, said he asked his wife several times: “‘Triplets? Are you sure?’ It was

very overwhelming.”

Multiple births don’t run in either of their families. “Not even twins,” Lauren Whiteley said.

Identical triplets also were born Dec. 5 to a woman in Billings, Montana. Dr. Savitri Kumar, a neonatologist at Henry Ford Hospital, said data on identical triplet births by natural conception varies from one in 60,000 to one in 2 million. Most doctors call the chances “one-in-a-million,” Kumar said.

Four sets of triplets were born at the hospital last year, but they weren’t identical, she added.

“This is the very first set of identical triplets I have ever seen,” she said.

For the Whiteleys, it will help that both sets of grandparents live within a mile, while aunts and uncles also are in the area. The grandparents “will do what they need done on a day-to-day basis — as far as feeding, getting the kids to and from where they have to go,” said Bob Whiteley.