

ARCHIVE

Powerful images can sometimes be lifesavers

By **BILL STEVENS**

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One by one, reporters and editors picked up the color photograph, stared at it, and then let it drop to the desk. A room normally rocking with loud voices and laughter fell silent.

Brett Puniska, posing in his Tampa Bay Lightning uniform, complete with hockey stick and helmet, could have been a cover boy for a magazine. You look into the handsome, smiling face of this 4-year-old and you know right away why people have children. You want to hug him.

Perhaps you had a similar reaction when you saw the same photograph after we published it on Friday. And then, perhaps, you did what some of us parents in the newsroom did the day we heard Brett's name for the first time: call home. Is our wall unit safe? Is our home safe?

Brett was killed Wednesday evening when a new, 400-pound entertainment center toppled on him at his home in New Port Richey. It was the second such accident in this area since March, when 18-month-old Jonathan Wheeler of Land O'Lakes was crushed beneath a dresser.

In each case, the parents allowed us into their lives despite profound grief to talk about their children. What courage it must take, I thought. But it was clearly important for them to tell us what made their children so special, and to warn others that you can lose them in an instant _ even in a place considered so safe.

I also write today because of the reaction we received over the coverage of Brett's death in the Thursday paper. Some callers thought we were intrusive because we published photographs of Brett's mother, Marilyn Sue Puniska, as she waited outside her home in an ambulance.

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moments, and the last thing she needed was reporters and photographers swarming to the scene.

One caller angrily challenged me to put myself in the Puniskas' position. How would I feel if my child had just been killed and a photographer was taking my wife's picture? "Have you no heart?"

I understand the reaction completely. I understand that aggressive, deadline reporting of breaking news often puts us in the position of defending our actions the next day. But I also believe a newspaper is expected to cover major events in its community thoroughly and accurately.

Almost 20 years ago, we responded to a similar tragedy in New Port Richey when a young boy suffocated in a backyard dirt cave-in. Our photographer captured the parents from a distance near the dirt pile, and many callers expressed their anger the next day when we published the picture and story.

They didn't know that the editor in charge had himself lost a young son to a similar accident while at play. He didn't tell them. Time passed and we moved on to other stories.

Then last year, a woman called me to complain that somebody had left a large pile of dirt near the New Port Richey Recreation Center. She was worried that a child might be killed there, because she remembered a photo and story that we carried all those years ago.

Powerful images.

I regret that our words and images can cause such anguish. In the case of the Puniskas, I am grateful that they welcomed us into their home the next day for detailed discussion of their child. And I am convinced that their decision to share the details _ and that beautiful photograph of Brett _ will save another child's life.

_ Bill Stevens is the editor of the North Suncoast editions of the Times.

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