

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz



Grave Danger for Jonathan

I love to drive around Kentlands and Lakelands and took pleasure in counting the lots beginning in 1992. Lyn used to make fun of me as I counted the ones still available for building and constantly checked on the development of the community anticipating the time when bulldozers would no longer drone through the day. Now there are no vacant lots, but I still love looking at the communities and at the lovely details on the houses. When I drive around, my speed is from 12 to 15 miles per hour so that I can see things.

On March 19, I was enjoying such a drive in the very late afternoon or evening and was delighted that it was light longer. As I was in the Lakelands rounding the corner from Stonemason to Gentlewood streets, a recycle container hurled toward me in the middle of the road. Since I go slowly, I was able to stop immediately. Inside the container was curled a little boy, and underneath it was a skateboard. The boy was skillful enough to steer the contraption by shifting his weight. He steered around my stopped car and rode to the sidewalk behind me.

I backed up and lowered the window.

“Do you know how dangerous that is to ride down the middle of the street?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Jonathan.”

“Do you have a helmet?”

“No.”

“Do you realize that you could have been killed?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Where do you live?”

“Over there,” he said, pointing north.

“In Lakelands? ...What is your last name?”

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry; I won’t do it again.”

“What is your last name?”

“Why do you want to know my last name?” he asked beginning to plead and approaching my car (something else that we don’t want kids to do since he didn’t know me).

Jonathan's parents are doing a lot of things right. The boy is inventive as witnessed by his use of ordinary items for play things and by his ability to gain skill in using them. He is polite and well spoken for his age, which must be around eight or nine. He is engaging and attractive with dark wavy hair, very dark brown eyes, an olive complexion, and a lithe physique that urges him toward play and fun.

There seemed to be little of definite value that I could do for Jonathan, so I exhorted him not to ever ride in the road again. I drove on, and some of Jonathan's friends joined him. At least they were skateboarding on the sidewalk. It was clear from our brief question session that Jonathan's main concern was that his parents not find out. If I had known his parents, or could learn their identity, I would have phoned them. I have often thought in relation to this event of our mayor's now famous statement that when we were growing up in Gaithersburg, if you threw a stone, someone called your parents before it hit the window. Some parents find that annoying. I consider informing them of their child's danger worth the risk. Many parents are wise enough to be grateful for the information. One thing I am certain of is that Jonathan is not going to tell his parents what happened.

It's not that we didn't do dangerous things when I was growing up. We did. On Maryland Avenue, there is a deep hill that goes down and then up again. It was wonderful for sledding. There were few enough cars then that children were allowed to sled in the street. People drove slowly, and children would move aside when a car came through. One thing that my father told us never to do, however, was to grab a car's bumper when lying on a sled to hitch a ride. A number of the boys did that. I don't remember whether my brother ever did, but I didn't. Everyone knew it wasn't allowed, but kids did it anyway. I remember one driver was aware that kids had grabbed his bumper, so he got out and severely scolded the boys.

As it happened, it wasn't from the street that kids in my high school found tragedy. It was sledding on a hill. Sharon's head met a tree; on the same sled was her boyfriend, John, whose left arm hit and was permanently paralyzed. Sharon's funeral was at Grace Methodist Church on Frederick Avenue three days later. The town was still small then, but the church was packed to over-flowing. Her mother and sister were crying so much that they could barely stand. Her father and brother stood solemn and straight helping the mother and sister into and out of the pew. Not a tear glistened in their eyes. Men weren't supposed to cry then, but despite that, I was astounded at their bravery. Sharon and her brother had gotten along unusually well for high school siblings.

In the nineteenth century, families typically had up to ten children and half often died from disease or accident. In the mid-twentieth century, losing school aged children was unusual. When it happened, the event was carved into the core memory of those around.

With the amount of traffic now, children aren't supposed to play in the street. If a car had come around the corner going at even the usual rate of speed, Jonathan would surely have met tragedy. Telling him that he could have been killed makes no sense to him. He was concerned only that his parents not find out. What we know about childhood is that children have not developed the restraints to their exuberance that would enable them to adhere to what they have been told.

Compounding the problem for Jonathan were cars parked along the street all the way around the corner. Drivers could not see what was coming. When I went to look at the corner later that week, I saw that there were no markings indicating a restriction in parking.

Several months prior to meeting Jonathan, I drove down Otis way and met a similar problem. Cars were parked solid from Little Quarry Road to Tschiffely Square Road, and two girls on bicycles shot out of the mews between the cars. They were around Jonathan's age and, like him, very polite—"I'm sorry; I'm sorry."

Sorry doesn't work if a child gets injured or worse. Fortunately, I was also driving then between twelve and fifteen miles per hour.

I am convinced that the world will be a better place ten, twenty, fifty years from now if Jonathan and those girls are still in it.

Jonathan's parents don't have a clue that they could have lost their little boy in the late afternoon of a beautiful March day.

Monthly April © 2006 mh