

Skeen testimony

April 24, 2001

Written statement of Autumn Alexander Skeen,  
child passenger safety legislative advocate  
before the United States Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee  
Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs, Foreign Commerce and Tourism  
Supporting documents attached

Mr. Chairman and Senators of the committee, I am Autumn Alexander Skeen of Washington state.

Thank you for allowing me to testify. It is seemly that this opportunity would come less than two weeks after our son's birthday. Spring and Easter are the most painful times now, their messages of new life and green glory underscoring what Anton has lost. He would have been nine years old this year, just like your son, Senator Fitzgerald.

But Anton was four years old and a good-size lad, when he, his sister and I came home for summer vacation in June 1996, leaving my husband at his post in Tokyo as the Pacific editor of Stars and Stripes. We were to have a whole summer at our family cabin in Central Oregon.

My parents live in Seattle and for the summer I borrowed their SUV, a 1988 Dodge Raider. In the whirl of travel, my mind quickly touched upon the bases of transport: The front seats were where the only lap-shoulder belts were in this vehicle. And of course, it had no air bags. Washington state law said you could buckle children Anton's size and weight -- nearly 50 pounds and too big for a child carseat -- into seatbelts. I concluded he should be up front with the best seatbelts. I 'm a journalist; I had researched the law in 1993, writing on the lack of child passenger safety laws on Indian reservations, so I felt knowledgeable about the law. I was a mom who played by the rules -- bike helmets, limited TV time, brushed teeth and bedtime by 8:30.

Anton's grandmother remembers buckling him into the seat that morning we left Seattle: "I get to ride up in front with Mommy!" he crowed to her. He was a sunny child, loving, smart, healthy--everything a parent could want.

He and I headed toward Central Washington, planning to visit friends there before driving on to Oregon. My daughter Geneva was to follow us the next day with my sister, her aunt. Two and a half hours into our drive, we were traveling approximately 65 miles an hour on I82, crossing a high desert steppe, a desolate place used by the army as a firing range. Anton's head leaned against the window as he fell asleep in the warm sun.

When the noon news faded I reached for the car radio, which was positioned exceptionally low, just over the car's hump. At the same time, we passed a semi-truck in the right-hand lane. And basically that's all I remember. At the same time I leaned over, we apparently hit a gust of wind, drifting onto the shoulder, which had no rumble strips. I must've startled when I realized where we were and overcorrected. The wheels bit into the volcanic ash and sand, tripping the vehicle into a triple roll.

They found me, unconscious in the car, critically injured, but nonetheless alive. The seatbelt held me in, saving my life.

But next to me, they found no one. When the Washington State Patrol examined the car, they found Anton's seatbelt still clicked shut, but Anton was in the median, dead from massive head injuries. The seatbelt had failed to hold him in, and he was thrown out, only to have the car roll over him.

And just that fast, this beautiful boy was gone, never to be seen nor held by me again.

Anton did get to the cabin in Oregon in the end but as ashes, Senators, ashes we spread in the cold Metolius River. I have wept a river since then, too, for the pain of missing him and the pain of knowing what he has missed is an insurmountable sorrow for his father and me.

I realize, however, one mother's broken heart alone is not enough to change a nation's behavior, but Anton's death was no anomaly. Some 500 children in Anton's age group bloody the roadsides of America and die; thousands more are hurt for life. Since this past Thanksgiving, within a 50-mile radius of my house in separate incidents, a 5 1/2 year old boy in an adult seatbelt was partially thrown out in a rolling pick up and died; a 6-year-old-girl in an adult seatbelt was thrown out in a crash and died, last week in a three- car collision another 6-year-old was injured by the adult seatbelt itself. And those are just the ones I know about in rural southeast Washington.

These aren't statistics who suffer or die, these are worlds that die: toy trucks and teddy bears packed away; bedtime stories boxed up; hollow birthdays celebrated only with prayers and burning candles. The start of the school year only signals more sadness for parents—mentally graduating lost children along: first grade, second grade, and now third grade. Because most of these deaths are preventable, guilt and blame drive divorce, chemical dependency, family dysfunction and yes, suicide to fill the empty silhouette of the child.

I was fortunate in one way -- my marriage and psyche have survived this catastrophe. Nonetheless, almost equal to my sorrow is my rage--at myself and at the other elements of this horror, foremost the lack of regulation in regard to safety practices and safety equipment for passengers smaller than 170-pound males.

Where have our governments been? Even though car crashes are the #1 killer of children, apparently there hasn't been enough dead-youngster data to set off a commensurate alarm. Yet, people in safety and automotive circles have known about this problem of poor fit for the post-carseat age child since the late 1980's. Safety equipment in a car is no guarantee, but it does imply a chance. Perhaps Anton would not have survived the crash forces, but we'll never know because his seatbelt did not, could not deliver. Too late, in retrospect I see how ludicrous it was to think its ill fit would suffice. But I extrapolated then that if the law said it was OK, someone somewhere had tested the engineering. Adult seatbelts are better than nothing, nonetheless they present an illusion of safety, a lie in effect, to these children who trust us with their very lives, the same way I naively trusted the law.

I'm not the only one. Parents are awash in health and safety messages. Their priority-filters tell them that if a warning is not law, the potential is not life threatening. Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to car crashes.

In our commuter society, children travel more than 1,000 car trips a year and yet they are subjected to the capricious nature of state child passenger safety laws, all of which, even Washington and California's new improved ones, fall short of best practice. But parents don't

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realize this.

These treasured children are Americans first; they carry American passports, not state passports. They deserve a uniform standard of regulatory protection coast to coast, whether that involves auto design, or booster seats or both. As citizens, it's their birthright to come of age. We all failed Anton; good conscience and good government demand we not fail another vulnerable young spirit. ....