

In Memory of Dr. Robert Sanders

“I walked out on the balcony alone and had a few tears well up. I said ‘by golly, it’s happened, and if this works it may happen all over.’” That is how the now late Dr. Robert Sanders, a soft-spoken Tennessee pediatrician and catalyst for groundbreaking injury prevention legislation, described his victory in a historic senatorial vote over mandatory car-seats.

Today, few parents question the benefits of using a child safety seat. In fact, 99 percent of infants and 94 percent of toddlers nationally are restrained using child safety seats while riding in motor vehicles.¹ Yet what are now norms were once anomalies. In the early 1970’s, when car injuries were the leading cause of death for young children in Tennessee and in many other states, car seat use was less than 15 percent nationally. Many legislators and citizens bristled at the notion of telling parents how to keep their children safe, seeing it as an issue of personal freedom and civil liberties.

When Dr. Sanders became chair of the state’s chapter of the Accident Prevention Committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics, he realized that he had an opportunity and responsibility to address this easily preventable cause of injury and morbidity through legislation. In 1976, he proposed the nation’s first mandatory child restraint law, but it was killed in committee. Opponents vehemently attacked the bill and Dr. Sanders, even falsely accusing him of owning stock in a safety seat manufacturing company. The following year he redoubled his efforts. Dr. Sanders, his wife, and the lawmakers’ own family physicians began to call legislators’ homes on weekends in order to enlist their support. A growing army of health professionals distributed fact sheets throughout the state that listed the pros and cons of the proposed law. The bill was finally

¹ *The National Highway Transit Safety Administration*

approved by two votes in 1978 and became Tennessee's Child Passenger Safety Law. This feat helped earn Dr. Sanders the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2003, in honor of the law's 25th anniversary.

By 1985 all 50 states had adopted similar legislation. Child restraints saved the lives of approximately 5,984 children between 1975 and 2003.² Dr. Sanders' efforts not only saved children's lives in Tennessee and beyond, but also established a precedent for using policy to effect broad norms and behavior change. One person's willingness to see beyond current trends in thinking, to take on the often uncomfortable job of changing behavioral norms, and to recognize the potential of legislation in doing so, resulted in broad national change and gave hope and precedence to other similar initiatives. More recent policies (such as helmet laws, drinking age statutes, and tobacco control regulations) were, at least in part, possible due to Dr. Sanders' success against seemingly insurmountable odds. This unlikely hero reminds us that even individual efforts on the local level can affect change nationally. May his work continue to teach and inspire us.

Prevention Institute

² The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates. *Traffic safety facts* 2003. Washington, DC: DOT, NHTSA, 1998.)