

# Crusading mom talks with N-W school bus drivers

by Susan Mikula Campbell

When Terri Wright's two sons left on the school bus the morning of Dec. 16, 2004, she never dreamed that only one would come back through the door at the end of the day.

Six-year-old Jacob, after getting off the school bus, slid on loose gravel at the curb and fell under a back wheel of the bus. The driver could see 8-year-old Jeremiah and assumed Jacob was with his older brother. He drove the bus forward.

The accident rocked the small community of Neosho, Mo., and devastated the Wright family. Jeremiah, who watched the bus roll over his brother, suffered from posttraumatic stress syndrome. Their 16-year-old older brother worried that the accident might have been prevented if he hadn't been home sick that day. Jacob's classmates had nightmares. The anguished bus driver died of a heart attack about a year later.

Terri Wright decided she couldn't "sit home and cry about my son the rest of my life." Instead she started researching school bus accidents. In July 2007, Wright was asked to speak at the state conference of Missouri Association for Pupil Transportation, which led to other speaking engagements in Missouri. Then she was interviewed for the trade



Terri Wright of Neosho, Mo., whose son was killed by a school bus, talked with about 100 school bus drivers, aides and mechanics as part of a Safety Refresher Course on Tuesday at Niagara-Wheatfield.

journal *School Bus Fleet*. This July, she was speaking in Maine. On Tuesday, she spoke to about 100 Niagara-Wheatfield bus drivers, aides and mechanics at their Safety Refresher Course.

Niagara-Wheatfield has a fleet of 72 buses that serve its schools, parochial schools, BOCES, special education students, or are back-ups that provide

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extra capacity for sports trips in the afternoon.

In her research, Wright discovered three points, any one of which, if followed, could have saved her son's life, she said.

First is the positioning of the bus at the stop. She advised drivers to stop at the beginning of the intersection and have the children walk away from the front of the bus.

"If you lose sight of a child for one second, you could lose them forever," she said.

Second, drivers should count and recount the children getting off the bus. If you can't see all the children, lock down the bus and get off and find the missing child, she said, "Holler, yell. Make them show up and wave at you. Do whatever you have to do to make sure."

The third issue is the need for education for drivers, parents and

the kids.

"As parents, we didn't know what a danger zone was, and most importantly, our kids didn't know," she said.

The danger zone is 10 feet on each side of the bus and up to 15 feet in front and back of the bus. Parents should tell their children about the danger zone and designate a safe spot, like a particular tree, to go to after getting off the bus.

Parents should also tell their children never to go back to the bus, even if they forgot or dropped something. "No backpack, no picture for mom, no lunchbox is that important."

Wright ended her talk with a montage of photos of Jacob ("our little angel, our ray of sunshine") from the day of his birth to the picture taken at school the day he died ("It was going to be mommy's

Christmas present"). Several female bus employees bolted for the door in tears. A male driver studiously avoided looking at any of the three overhead screens.

New N-W bus driver Diane Fritton said the school district's bus drivers already are well trained, but that Wright's talk provided reinforcement of the fact that they always have to be alert.

"I was in awe of her, that she'd be that brave and concerned for children everywhere," she said. "I started to get that lump and a little tears. How could it not?"

Wright said it's not easy to talk about the accident, but even Jeremiah wants her to continue in his brother's memory.

"It's hard to relive that day, but I always had a lot of faith in God, and I just lean on that," Wright said, adding that it's more important to get the word in the hope of

saving young lives. "It's also a kind of therapy to talk about it and remember."

Not only school bus drivers have to be extra careful as school opens. AAA Western and Central New York's "School's Open - Drive Carefully" campaign encourages drivers to be extra cautious in areas where children are present, especially in school zones and residential neighborhoods. Nearly half (45 percent) of vehicles observed in these areas during a 2003 national observation survey did not come to a complete stop at stop signs; 37 percent rolled through a stop sign; 7 percent did not even slow down; one-third of drivers violated stop signs even when a child pedestrian was present; and two-thirds exceeded the posted speed limit during the 30 minutes before and after school.

AAA Western and Central New

York offers the following advice for drivers:

- Slow down in or near school and residential areas, and be sure to come to a complete stop in all intersections.

- Look for clues such as AAA School Safety Patrol members, adult school crossing guards, bicycles, and playgrounds, which indicate children could be in the area.

- Scan between parked cars and other objects for children who may dart out into the street near school zones, playgrounds, bus stops, and in neighborhoods.

- Limit distractions such as cell phones, CD players or other devices that cause you to take your eyes off the road.

- Drive with your headlights on - even during the day - so children and other drivers can see you.

- Practice extra caution in adverse weather conditions.

- Pay particular attention near schools during the morning and afternoon hours.

- Always stop for school buses that are loading and unloading students. It's the law.