

Laurence PEROUEME's contribution to the session entitled
« *Turning tragedy into advocacy* »

Introduction

My name is Laurence PEROUEME and I am the President of « SAUVE-QUI-VEUT », a voluntary French organization that I founded in February 1999 in order to prevent children's drownings and support the families of young victims.

I feel very grateful to Maureen Williams, David Calabria, Justin Francis and Lynda Courtois who made it possible for me to come to Austin and speak at this 4th annual Drowning Prevention Symposium. I also want to say how happy and moved I feel today to share this session, entitled "**Turning tragedy into advocacy**" with Carol.

Why did I get involved in prevention of children's drownings ?

Simply because I was directly concerned and realized that parents had a very important part to play. I had the strong feeling that only parents of victims could be really rightful and motivated, as they had nothing to gain, nothing to justify, nothing to expect.

This is why I am proud to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of my son, on behalf of all these young victims, on behalf of all those poor parents whose life just collapsed because of drowning.

Our children cannot speak any longer but I can speak for them.

I will briefly tell you the main reasons why I decided to involve myself in prevention of children's drownings and then what I managed to achieve in France through the action of my group.

"SAUVE-QUI-VEUT" is not easy to translate as there is a play on words : "SAUVE-QUI-PEUT" means "STAMPEDE"... The idea was mainly to say that if we all want to, if we refuse to give up the game and believe it was only bad luck, then it would be possible to save many children from drowning.

Those who live are those who struggle

My son Benoît died from drowning in a private swimming pool, in July 1996. He was only 16 months old.

There are no words to say how much I miss him, although it happened almost 9 years ago. It could be an hour, or ages ago. Grief does not know any limit, any reason, any term. My child would have turned 10 last month and there was no birthday party. But I am here today in Austin. And he is with us.

I still miss his smile, his voice, his smell, his pretty loving little face. I miss his special way of laughing and calling me. I miss all the years that were suddenly stolen to me. I miss the spotty teenager, the student, the young man, the father, he would have become. I miss the family parties with him. And I also miss the young woman I was before life swept everything away : my happiness, my convictions, my future. Within a few hours, without any notice. I was not prepared for that, no one is ever prepared to face the death of one's child.

I only know that there is a time BEFORE and a time AFTER the 10th of July 1996. And that life will never be the same. That I will never be perfectly happy. Never. Since part of myself drowned with my son, somewhere in a stupid swimming pool in a lovely part of France. Since Benoît's death, there is a gap that nothing nor nobody is able to fill.

And there is nothing we can do against it. It is like that.

About this tragedy, let us say it was an accident that should never have happened ! As most drownings, I suppose.

If the swimming pool had been protected with a reliable fence.

If my best friend had been informed about the huge difference between a winter cover and a security cover.

If my husband and I had decided not to go to this house, after weeks of doubts... (We were very worried about the swimming pool and did not know what to do : should we accept ? Is it really cautious with young children ?)

If I had not stopped watching my child for a little while.

If Benoît had not wanted, for some unknown reason, to get closer to this fascinating pool.

All these "ifs" and "whys" and "hows" that drive you mad...

It reminds me of this beautiful and stirring novel written by Carver, an American Writer, (“Lemon”) that helped me to understand that these questions would never give my child back to me but would certainly get me drowned ! Some questions had to be left unanswered and I had to live with the idea of my responsibility.

Yes indeed, *I felt responsible but I was not guilty.*

I did not manage to prevent my child from drowning but there was no need to turn my back on tomorrow. We were unlucky, we were not correctly informed, we had our part of responsibility, of course, otherwise children would never drown !

Most of all, we were victims.

This is why I wanted to break the law of silence, I wanted to be a witness, I wanted to convince other people to fight and I would find my own course.

My son’s death was so unfair, so unacceptable, that I could not stand the idea that he just died *for nothing*. Benoît had the right to grow up, like the other kids. He did not deserve such a fate, we did not deserve it !

Some people still believe that it was the only way for me to feel less guilty, but I can tell you this was not the point ! I take upon myself my own responsibility : as a mother I even assume it.

Benoît was my son, and he could be alive. He should be. This is the only truth. He died from drowning and *my* fate then would be trying to save other children. There was nothing I could do for him except witnessing... This was clear.

And that way he would never really die, he would be with me on that long way that will never end, until my last breath. It was not only something vital for me to be able to get over it, but also a real duty.

I decided then it was time to help other families not to go through such pain, it was time to struggle and I felt ready to work hard and be patient. I refused to listen to those who tried to change my mind ! Some close friends or relatives, even my husband, told me it was a wonderful idea... but that I should leave it to someone else, that it would be too painful for me, that all I needed was a good job having nothing to do with drownings and swimming pools, that it was too ambitious, and doomed to fail.

I suppose now that my very strong personal conviction that I made the right choice helped me to convince people to join us. Although it was not so easy ! Some opponents would often say I was going “on a crusade”, that I was victim of a “fencephobia”, that my pain was “driving me crazy”.

To be honest, I did not really mind.

I knew it was a far-reaching scheme. I knew also I would have to fight against opponents and lobbies. That it would be very long and tough. However I felt strong enough to keep my course and I had no other choice anyway !

I will never know *why* this horrible thing happened to us, why *my* son -and not the neighbour's- died from drowning, but at least I know *why* I decided to create [SAUVE-QUI-VEUT](#).

During all these years, Benoît has always been with me and he has given all his love, his strength and his confidence to me.

Some words of Victor Hugo, one of the most famous French poets, have never left my mind :

*“Those who live are those who struggle
Those who, constantly, night and day, have before their eyes, either a holy work
or a great love”*

And for the people who speak French, I would like to say it in French :

*“Ceux qui vivent ce sont ceux qui luttent
Ce sont ceux dont un dessein ferme emplit l'âme et le front,
Ceux qui marchent sans cesse, ayant devant les yeux, nuit et jour, ou quelque
saint labour ou quelque grand amour »*

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Years of action

Before I decided to found [SAUVE-QUI-VEUT](#), I had been trying to write to members of Parliament, to reporters and consumer groups in order to inform them about the danger of private swimming pools for young children. I am afraid I had no real credibility at that time.

I was only considered as “the unfortunate-mother-of-a-child-who-died-from-drowning-in-a-swimming pool”. I have been told so many times that I was making too much ado about nothing, because I felt so miserable and so guilty, and that I was trying to find scape-goats... like swimming pool builders !

I think it is necessary to explain that there was absolutely no drowning prevention policy in France in July 1996 ! It was a bit of a shock for me, and our relatives, and neighbours to learn about children's drownings in swimming pools. There was a sort of taboo about children's drownings as parents used to feel so guilty and desperate that they kept to themselves.

This is the reason why I started from scratch : no official surveys, no information campaigns, no standards, no safety regulations, just nothing ! My starting point was basic : too many children were victims of drownings every year and pools had to be protected with safety fences.

Some people were of a great help and I feel very grateful to **Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN**, our current Prime Minister, and his personal assistant who has become a real friend. I wrote to nearly 500 people's representatives to inform them about young children's drownings but Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN was the only one to understand that drowning was a major public health topic and gave me his strong support as early as October 1997.

We worked for years together until the French Parliament passed a law in January 2003, stipulating that every outdoor pool for private use must be covered by a security system approved by AFNOR by January 2004 for the newly built pools and by January 2006 for the swimming pools built before January 1, 2004.

When I managed to meet Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN in October 1997, he was a senator and not personally involved with drownings ! He told me that he accepted to work on that issue, with all the people concerned (swimming pool builders, health professionals, public ministers, consumer groups) because he was fully aware of his responsibility as a people's representative.

Our Prime Minister is very pragmatic and said to me :

“I agree with you, this is not a question of figures ! The problem is not to know how many children drown each year in France : if we manage to save only one child a year from drowning in a swimming pool, it is worthwhile !

There is a problem and there is a solution : all outdoor pools should be protected with reliable safety fences.

Let us get statistics, let us inform parents and public opinion about the danger of swimming pools and let us try to do without a law to reduce the number of victims.”

Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN was expecting the owners to change their attitude and cover their swimming pools by a fence without being compelled. He assumed that it was mainly a question of information to make people understand there was a real danger. Unfortunately, it did not work that way !

As long as security systems were only recommended, owners and people who take charge of young children did not feel that concerned ! As you know, accidents only happen to the others, to those irresponsible parents who are not able to look after their children... French people also consider they can do whatever they want in their own home and that they are even allowed not to secure their swimming pools if they feel like it.

I remember how difficult it was to get the swimming pool professionals involved in our drowning prevention policy !! Their attitude was over-simple : they had nothing to do with children's drownings as children had to be under the supervision of their parents. No need to argue then !

In June 1999, I was invited to speak as a President of a group of parents in Toulon at a Symposium entitled “ *Private swimming pools and young children security*”. It was a great and stirring experience for me to explain the action of a parents organization like SAUVE-QUI-VEUT but I had also to brave a very aggressive attitude from the swimming pool builders.

It reminds me of the warning of Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN who told them very bluntly on this occasion :

“If you do not want to understand that we should work together to reduce the number of children's drownings in private swimming pools, then we shall keep our course *without you* and you will have to accept a given situation...”

Nevertheless they would often **throw a wrench** in our works and it took them years to understand that they should work *with* us in their own interest !

In his first bills, Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN was only proposing safety fences to owners but the swimming pool builders demanded different security systems and waged war against fences.

This is the reason why the RAFFARIN Law was a compromise.

Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN also helped me to get subsidies to run a campaign in the Poitou Charentes area. Can you believe that French people had to wait until June 1999 to be warned against children's drownings for the first time ! The message of that very first prevention campaign was very mild : “Protégez votre bonheur”, which means “**Protect the joy of your life**”.

Then we ran other local and national campaigns, and developed different actions in order to inform children at schools about drownings and teach them how to swim as early as possible. We have also started resuscitation courses for pupils sponsored by D&D Technologies in a school located in Nîmes, in the South of France.

Conclusion

I cannot tell you everything about my long course from 1996 till now, but I hope that I have managed to make you understand how it was possible for me to “*turn tragedy to advocacy*”.

I would like to share another words with you, written by an Irish soldier to his lover, that perfectly express my own feelings and the reasons why I am able to speak at this 4th Drowning Prevention Symposium :

*“You can shed tears that she has gone
Or you can smile because she has lived.*

*You can close your eyes and pray that she will come back
Or you can open your eyes and see all that she has left.*

*You heart can be empty because you cannot see her
Or you can be full of the love you shared.*

*You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday
Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.*

*You can remember her and only that she has gone
Or you can cherish her memory and let it live on.*

*You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back
Or you can do what she would want : smile, open your eyes, love and go on.”*

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

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