
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Not One More Child Drowns: Infant Swimming Resource

A mother shares her story of tragedy and explains how you can prevent infant drowning.

By Marla Carnes

August 2011



Courtesy of Marla and Dwain Carnes

My son, Sterling, was born when I was 27 years old. I stayed home with him. In fact, he never spent a moment away from me during the first two years of his life. We never had a babysitter. He was with me every second of the day, except when we both slept. We had such an extraordinary bond with each other and loved each other more than words could describe.

1 of 9



Sterling's second birthday.

When he turned 2, I enrolled him into a wonderful mother's-day-out program twice a week and joined a Bible study once a week. The first day he cried uncontrollably, as I had never left him before. They called me back to come pick him up within about 30 minutes. He saw me and ran into my arms crying.

Needless to say, it was very hard to take him back to the program, but I did. He cried less each time I took him, and within a couple of weeks, he loved his "school." I gave him a "special kiss" on his hand each time I dropped him off. That special kiss was from my lipstick. That made him feel safe and that a part of me was with him.

The Unexpected

On Wednesday, March 7, 2007, we went to a bridal shower immediately after Bible study for my future sister-in-law, who was also in my study group. I had never been to the house that the shower was to be held at. I wasn't sure if I should even go to the shower because I had my son with me and it would be hard to watch him and do shower stuff. I actually stressed about it for about a week prior to the shower, until another lady in our group said she would bring her 4-year-old daughter. I felt better that I wouldn't have the only child at the shower. However, I still needed something to entertain my son while we were taking care of shower business, so I bought him a new Mr. Potato Head set and the new Peter Pan DVD to keep him entertained.

When we arrived at the shower, we rang the doorbell and walked inside to the foyer of the house. Sterling was carrying his new Mr. Potato Head set. Directly in front of the front door was a wall of windows with a swimming pool in

the back yard. My first thought when we walked into the house was, "Oh no, there is a pool. I'm going to have to watch Sterling a lot more carefully. Oh wait, it's winter and we won't be outside." I felt a little relief about that.

Then I noticed the stairs in the house. I thought, "Oh no, there are stairs. I'm going to have to watch Sterling a lot more carefully." We didn't have stairs in our house, so Sterling was not good at going up and down them yet.

For some reason, Sterling stayed right by my side, which was out of his character. He was the type of child to just do what he wanted and go where he wanted. Surprisingly, he stayed right by my side as the hostess showed us around the living-room, kitchen and dining-room areas.

It was time to sit down for lunch. I was surprised there was not a seat at the table for my son, so I was thinking of letting him sit on the step behind my chair in the dining room to watch his portable DVD player and eat his lunch. The hostess noticed I was trying to figure out what to do with him and offered to let him watch the movie in her bedroom, which was also adjacent to the foyer, opposite the dining room. I said, "No, thank you." I told her that I had brought his portable DVD and that he would be fine watching that. She insisted and told me that the other little girl who was there had been to her house many times and watched movies in her bedroom. She invited me into her bedroom to have a look around. I didn't see immediate danger, so I agreed because he would be with another child and we would be just outside of the bedroom.

We dumped his new Mr. Potato Head toy set onto her bedroom floor and put the Peter Pan movie on in the DVD player in her bedroom. The only thing I was hesitant about was a step that led from her bedroom down into the master bathroom. I was worried he would fall down the step. I didn't walk into her bathroom to look around because I wasn't invited to do so. I've always felt that it's rude to walk into a part of someone's house when you have not been invited there. I was worried about the step, but I thought to myself that I was being overprotective and walked out of the room.

**I thought to myself that I
was being overprotective and
walked out of the room.**



Dwain, Marla and Sterling out and about. Sterling was not a stranger to water but wasn't prepared when he fell into a pool.

After we had sat down for lunch and a little time had past, I was beginning to feel that I needed to check on my son. About the same moment, the mom of the little girl said she was going to go check on them because they had been quiet for a little too long. I agreed that she should go because if I went, my son would have insisted I stay with him to finish watching the movie. My son was able to watch full-length Disney movies, and they kept his attention, so I wasn't overly worried about him being too quiet in the bedroom.

The other mom went to check on the kids, and about a minute or two later, we all heard her make a weird scream. We all thought that was strange, and another lady in our group said she would go check on them. A moment later, we heard the other woman yell, "Call 911!"

When I heard that, my first thought was, "Oh no, something happened to the little girl!" Then I heard the rest of the sentence: "Something happened to Sterling!"

I thought he must have fallen down the step to the bathroom. I stood up from the table, and I was paralyzed with shock. I couldn't move and didn't know what to do or

where to go. Someone must have said he had fallen into the pool. My brain was trying to process all this, as we had seen Sterling go into the hostess's bedroom but never saw him come out of there. I was thinking, "I never saw him come out of the bedroom. How could he have fallen into the pool? How did he get outside? I don't even know how to get outside!"

The ladies were pushing me where to go. There was a back door off the kitchen to the back yard. However, the door had been closed and locked. I was thinking, "How did he get out this door? We didn't even see him go by us to get to the door!"

As I was pushed outside, I saw my son lying on the side of the pool and the first lady who had gone to check on the kids was all wet as she performed CPR with another lady. Sterling was a bluish-green color. I was trying to stay calm because I thought my son was going to be OK and at any moment would sit up, open his eyes and cry. I didn't want him to be scared. As I approached him, I realized that he wasn't opening his eyes and wasn't breathing.

"No," I thought, "everything will be OK! This kind of thing doesn't happen to me!"

But Sterling was still blue, and he wasn't opening his eyes. They were still doing CPR on my baby!

I began to scream at him to wake up. I was desperate! I was screaming, "Wake up, Sterling! Open your eyes! Wake up, Sterling! Just breathe, Sterling, breathe!"

Finally, the police, ambulance team and firefighters all showed up. The paramedic quickly examined him. He listened to his heart and then cut Sterling's pants and shirt right off him. I was getting pretty panicked because Sterling had not woken up yet and still wasn't breathing. I told the paramedic to do whatever he had to do to get my son breathing again.

They put him on a stretcher as they continued CPR. I asked where they were taking him. The paramedics told me they were going to life-flight him to a hospital in Galveston where they specialized in drowning victims.

Fighting for Life

Still in shock, my husband and I somehow both arrived at the hospital at the same time. After a wait that felt like an eternity, a nurse came to get us. She asked if we wanted to see our son. I said, "Yes, of course!" She took us into the ER, where they were working on him. They were still doing CPR with the bag. But now he had his pinkish color back. He was no longer greenish blue. I felt some hope and relief when I saw that but then realized he still wasn't breathing on his own. That made me worry again.

I did the only thing I knew to do. I started to talk to him again, really loudly.

"Hi, Sterling! You are doing so good! You got to ride on a helicopter and you did so good. Mommy is so proud of you! Mommy needs you to open your eyes, Sterling. Please open them for mommy. I love you so much. You are such a good boy. Sterling, please open your eyes so we can play. If you wake up, mommy and daddy will take you to see Mickey Mouse and the real Lightning McQueen and the real Buzz Lightyear!"

It went on like this for a little while. Finally, the nurse told us we needed to step out again. They said they would come get us if anything changed. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was the hospital letting us come see our son one last time so we could say goodbye. They were going to let him go and call his time of death right after we walked out.

A few minutes after we walked out of the room, a nurse came running out of the ER and grabbed us to come back in to see Sterling again. They told us that he had a pulse! The nurse grabbed me and put her arm around me and said, "I just have to let you know this: your son must really love you because the second you walked out of that ER room, he got a pulse." She told me that kind of thing just doesn't happen. They transferred our son to the pediatric intensive-care unit. We got to walk with him, and I kept telling Sterling how proud I was of him and what a good boy he was.



After the accident, Sterling was airlifted to a hospital where medical professionals fought to save his life.

Our family and friends arrived at the hospital throughout the day and into the night. As it got late, most people needed to leave to go home and sleep. I was not going to leave my son's bedside even though I was exhausted, because if he woke up and I wasn't there, he would be scared.

Ultimately, my son had been without oxygen for an undetermined amount of time, and it had taken 90 minutes to resuscitate him.

We spent a total of nine days in the hospital with my son. We went through many ups and downs. We had hope all along the way, but then the doctors would explain to us that there really wasn't any hope. We had many meetings with the neurosurgeon and the doctors to discuss my son's day-by-day condition and best and worse outcomes.

Ultimately, my son had been without oxygen for an undetermined amount of time, and it had taken 90 minutes to resuscitate him. That caused his brain to swell, which caused more damage to it. It was determined that



Even though he was alive, Sterling had been without oxygen for too long.

the entire part of the brain that made my son Sterling who he was had been damaged too badly to work again. Basically, my son would never be able to feed himself, talk, walk, recognize me or do anything else that makes a person a person. This was the hardest reality to face. I, as a mother, could not give up on hope for our son. I could not quit fighting for him, but I realized that it would not be fair for him to have me keep him alive on life support when he would never be "alive" again.

We had a meeting with the brain doctor and all the other doctors, and they told us we needed to decide if we were going to take him off life support or continue what was going on. My son was getting worse, but at first I didn't really understand what the doctors were asking me to decide. How could I decide to let my son die? After hours of meeting with them, they helped us decide that it would be the best thing because things were not going to get better.

We decided that the next day we would take my son off life support.

Saying Goodbye

The doctors told me that after life support was removed, Sterling would either pass away immediately or very quickly, or that he could hang around for a little while, meaning a few minutes to hours to days to weeks—or that he would be stuck in a vegetative state. This was very scary to me. I didn't want my son to be a vegetable forever. That wouldn't be fair to him. I also did not want my son to suffer before he died. If I was going to let my son go, I wanted him to be able to go in peace and without suffering.

The doctors could not tell me which of the three scenarios was going to happen until we actually took him off of the machines. I was 30 years old when this happened. How do you make such a decision? A person should not have to think about taking a child off life support, especially when it's his or her own child! But that is what we were facing.

We had to let our families know what we decided to do and explain our reasoning to them. Many of them were against it, but they had not been in all the meetings with the doctors. We had to do what we felt was best for our son, even if it meant letting him go. It was the hardest thing my husband and I have ever had to decide in our lives.



Marla holds her son in the days before he was disconnected from life support.

The night before we took our son off life support, we let any family member or friend come and say goodbye to him. We didn't want a huge group of people at the hospital the day our son was going to be taken off support because we didn't know which of the three scenarios was going to happen, and we didn't want people waiting around the hospital for a long time wanting to know what was going on. We felt like it would put too much pressure on us, and we wanted our focus to be on Sterling. We wanted it to be private.

The night before the worst day of my life, after everyone was done visiting my son, I crawled in bed with him and cried and cried and cried. I hugged him and held him and just cried on him. I couldn't believe this was going to be my last time to hold him and touch him and love on him and be a mom to him. I didn't want to leave him. I wanted to stay with him all night long. I studied every detail of his face and body. I was so scared I would forget something about him. How is a mother supposed to let her baby go? My heart was shattered in a billion pieces.

All too soon, the day arrived. We had them set up a TV in his room with his favorite movie, *Toy Story*, playing. The song *You Got a Friend in Me* played and I had to fight back the tears. My husband and I told our son that we loved him before they disconnected his life support.

This was the hardest thing that we have ever had to face in our lives. It seemed surreal.

My husband and I told our son that we loved him before they disconnected his life support. This was the hardest thing that we have ever had to face.



Sad parents saying goodbye to their baby.

The doctors asked if we wanted to hold him and I said yes. They picked Sterling up and placed him in my lap. I was sitting in a chair next to his bed. Then they took Sterling's breathing tube out of his throat, forcing him to breathe on his own. He started to throw up and was gasping desperately for air. I turned him on his side because he was choking on his vomit, and I was screaming at the nurses and doctors to help him. I then remembered that they couldn't. We had signed the do-not-resuscitate form.

I knew that it was best, but in the moment, I didn't want my baby suffering. The nurse came to my son immediately and suctioned the vomit from his mouth and throat. He was no longer choking, but he was still desperately gasping for air and was so weak that he could hardly fight. The doctor came to my son and gave him some morphine to help him calm down and relax.

Sterling never did open his eyes again after he had his accident. The morphine relaxed my son, and I was also able to relax. Over the next couple of hours, I held my son in my

arms as the doctors periodically gave my son morphine to keep him from suffering. I talked to him the entire

"Go, Sterling, go to the light. Mommy and daddy love you and it is OK."

I realized that he wasn't ready to leave me yet, so I started to tell him what my 2-year-old needed to hear. I said, "It's OK to go Sterling. Mommy and daddy will be there with you someday, but you need to go there first and check things out for us and see how things work. You won't have to share or take turns there. You can go on the jumpy-jump as much as you want and eat all the candy you want to eat."

We said his last prayer with him. We thanked God for every detail in Sterling's life that was important to Sterling, as well as to us. We told him what a good boy he was and we told him what a good son he was. We told him how proud and honored we were to be his parents. We explained to him that it was OK to go. We told him Jesus was waiting for him to come and play.

I don't remember exactly what I was saying at this moment, but a couple of minutes before my son passed, I felt a presence, an energy, his being, his soul, pass through me and go up. I do not know how to put into words exactly what I felt or experienced, but when it happened, I looked up at the doctors and shouted out to them that I just felt him pass through me. I didn't understand because he still was barely breathing and barely had vitals. I was looking to the medical team for an explanation, but they didn't know what I was talking about and could not explain anything to me. A couple of minutes later, my son's time of death was called.

His funeral was held six days later. We made it a celebration of his life. I didn't want anything else to be sad. We had balloons and popcorn, which we called, "poppy corn" because that was what Sterling called his favorite snack. No one dressed up because I told everyone that Sterling would not recognize them if they were dressed up. I wanted them to wear what Sterling saw us in every day. Many of our friends and relatives wore Disney shirts with Sterling's favorite characters on them. I put a Lightning McQueen and a Mater toy in each one of my son's hands when we buried him.

Not One More Child Drowns

I am telling you this detailed story of hell because I do not want anyone else to have to go through the pain of losing a child to drowning. People always think it won't happen to them. People always think they are the most watchful parents. Some people think it won't happen to them because they don't have a pool. Well, my son didn't drown in my pool. He drowned in someone else's pool at a house that we had never been to before. We were not even outside near the pool. It was not even summertime. It was winter. My son found a dog door that was in the master bathroom and was the size of an 8 x 11-inch piece of paper, and he crawled out. He was the size of a 4-year-old when he passed away. He was a day short of 2 years and 5 months old. I didn't know they had dog doors at the house we were at. I didn't even think to look for them.

I have had another child since my son has passed away. I have a daughter now. She looks just like her brother. I was very nervous about her being near water or in water because of what had happened to my son.



Sterling Carnes, beloved son.

My son took swim lessons from the YMCA, "mommy and me" classes. They didn't work. My son was already not afraid of water, and the classes did not teach him to swim at such a young age. I knew those classes didn't work, so with my daughter, I found Infant Swimming Resource (ISR). She has graduated from ISR and has already taken refresher courses. The refresher courses are mostly for my peace of mind, but they help her become even stronger in the water and give her even more confidence with her survival skills.

I think that if my son had taken the ISR lessons, he would still be here today.

I think that if my son had taken the ISR lessons, he would still be here today. The lessons not only give my daughter the skills to survive in the water in case she gets out of my sight, but they have also taught her to respect the water. In addition to adult supervision, ISR lessons are a second layer of protection for her around water. ISR lessons are the best gift I could give myself for peace of mind, and they're the best gift I could give my daughter for life-saving skills and confidence in the water.

Thank you, ISR, for all you do.

Founded by Harvey Barnett, Ph.D., in 1966, ISR endeavored to put an end to a preventable tragedy: childhood drowning. Barnett witnessed the aftermath of this tragedy after a neighbor's 9-month-old son reached the water alone. From that point on, Barnett vowed to do everything possible to ensure not one more child drowns, which is ISR's mission. A behavioral scientist by trade, Barnett adapted his theoretical knowledge of learning to pioneer the ISR Self-Rescue method used today to teach infants and young children to save themselves should they reach the water alone. What began as one man's mission has transformed into a worldwide organization. To date, ISR has 790 documented cases of children using ISR's survival-swimming techniques to save themselves from drowning.

CrossFit Kids supports ISR's mission that "not one more child drowns." Participate in Fight Gone Bad 6 on Sept. 17, 2011, to reach 3,000 kids. Sign up for the fundraiser at <http://www.sportsgrants.org/fgb6/isr> and make a donation by texting "FGB6" to 57682. From outside the U.S., text "FGB6" to 4246751014. The minimum donation is \$10, and standard text-message rates apply.

"All four of my children have successfully completed ISR's Self-Rescue program, and I am a believer that a moment's inattention does not have to cost a child his life," said CrossFit founder and CEO Greg Glassman. "Through this initiative, CrossFit Kids and ISR will be teaching children to be survivors."

For more information about ISR, visit Infantswim.com.



About the Author

For the last 15 years, Marla Carnes has lived in the Houston, Texas, area with her husband, Dwain. They have a 2-year-old daughter, Peyton. Marla is a stay-at-home mom and devoted wife. Dwain is an entrepreneur in the auto industry and a loving husband and father. As a family, they enjoy spending time together swimming, biking, hiking, skiing and traveling. Both Marla and Dwain love to take Peyton to the park and to pull her along for shorter bike rides. Peyton loves to swim! Several months shy of her third birthday, she can already swim across the pool, jump off the diving board and go down the water slide on her own. She does not use any type of flotation device and does not require any assistance. She is self-sufficient in the water, although her parents still keep her in sight at all times. Peyton also loves to dress up like a princess. She wakes up wanting to wear a princess dress, shoes and earrings. She loves to dance and to do gymnastics.