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Fearing for our kids' safety, no matter their age

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Today I set a homemade pencil holder on my desk, filled it with various pens and pencils and put it on prominent display. Made from plywood and paint, it was a Mother's Day gift from my fifth-grader. It says that I am "M" for "Marvelous."

It has been years since the sweetness of a simple gift has caused me to reflect on how easily it could all be taken away. For a long time, though, I worried about my children dying before me. It seems so possible when they're infants, so helpless. And then through the crazy toddler years, when they can run into traffic without thinking.

Now that they are school-age girls - sizeable and savvy - I feel a sense of safety. But clearly it is misplaced.

Because right here on the cover of my Saturday newspaper are parents, Ron and Jean Foster, who have lost every one of their three sons. Their oldest died of pneumonia when he was 7. Their youngest caught a virus that attacked the lining of his heart, causing his death at 15.

And just last week, a drugged driver in a reckless run from the police slammed into the car of their middle son, Scott, killing him at age 46. Clearly our children's lives are fragile at any age.

We try to make sense of these tragedies. And so, with the driver now in custody, the hunt is on to find out whether he could have been captured before killing Foster, himself a father of three sons.

Police had been pursuing John Licausi, the drugged driver, for a string of petty crimes: stealing a credit card and charging \$602, stealing two leaf-blowers from a work trailer, and selling a stolen meat slicer. Suffolk officers had called him a week before the May 8 crash and urged him to turn himself in. But he was drifting from residences in Riverhead and Ronkonkoma, and the police did not find him.

Neighbors say they saw police cruisers on the Ronkonkoma block near Licausi's apartment in the weeks before the

crash. Suffolk police say, "We never stopped looking."

A parole officer was also trying to find Licausi, 48. He had violated his parole twice since being released from prison 16 months ago, after serving time for burglary and forgery.

Police have not said what kicked off the chase in Farmingville last week.

Maybe Licausi looked in his rearview mirror, saw police cars behind him and ran to avoid another stint in prison. He blew through two red lights before plowing into Scott Foster's Toyota Camry. The entire pursuit lasted two minutes.

Foster's wife, Maureen, asks why someone like Licausi, with a long criminal record, was still behind the wheel on May 8. She also questions the need for a police chase.

I wonder about those things too. I wonder if the officials involved really have any good answers for her or her family.

Officialdom has not come up with answers for another Long Island tragedy, the case of Leatrice Brewer, who drowned her three children in a bathtub in February. Brewer, a 27-year-old New Cassel woman, drowned Jewell, 6, Michael, 5, and Innocent, 18 months. She is pleading insanity.

People around Brewer say these children's deaths could have been prevented if the Nassau Child Protective Services had had access to her mental health and criminal records. Or if the father of the two younger children had succeeded in his quest for custody. Or if Protective Services and the domestic court judge had shared what they knew about this obviously, pitifully sick mother.

Authorities failed in both cases, in nearly opposite ways. In one case, police were authorized to look for Licausi, and they were doing just that. They were responsible for him, and he crashed just as they caught up to him. In the other case, authorities were denied access to information they could have used to take action. Concerns for privacy left them powerless.

Not only is it tragic when a child dies before his or her parent, but it's clear that children can be unsafe when officials have the power to intervene, and even when they don't.

Yet in both cases, the authorities' actions seem to make sense. Sometimes tragedy gets away with murder, in spite of our best efforts.

So, you know that I'm going to cherish that pencil cup all the more after reflecting to write this column. Along with the ceramic hand mold, the colored sand in the baby-food jar, and the other sweet tokens of childhood. I hope we all will.

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