**French mother turns tragedy into advocacy**

The following is the text of a very powerful presentation by Laurence Pérouème at the 4th Annual Drowning Prevention Symposium, held in Austin, Tex. on April 28-29. Pérouème is the mother of a 16-month-old son who accidentally drowned in a private swimming pool in July 1996. She subsequently founded the voluntary organization Sauve-qui-Veut to work towards preventing child drownings and supporting the families of young victims. She was sponsored at the symposium by D&D Technologies. She shared a portion of the program entitled Turning Tragedy Into Advocacy with another mother of a drowning victim, Carol de Ibern, whose story will be shared in a future issue.

Why did I get involved in the 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 the young victims, on behalf of all those poor parents whose lives just collapsed because of those accidents.

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 the 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 it is a play on words: “Sauve-qui-Veut” 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 nine years ago. It could be an hour ago, 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 from 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. It was gone 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. 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 about it. It is like that.

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

What if the swimming pool had been protected with a reliable fence? What if my best friend had been informed about the huge difference between a winter cover and a security cover?

What 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 safe with young children?)

What if I had not stopped watching my child for a little while?

What 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 a beautiful and stirring novel – “Lemon” – that I read and which 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, but also a real duty.

I decided it was time to help other families to avoid going 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 and 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 “fencephobia,” that my pain was driving me crazy.

To be honest, I did not really mind these statements.

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 neighbor’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.”

Years of action
Before I decided to found Sauve-Qui-Veut, I had been trying to write to members of Parliament and to reporters and consumer groups in order to inform them about the danger of private swimming pools to young children. But 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 much ado about nothing, because I felt so miserable and so guilty, and that I was trying to find scapegoats — 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 to me, and our relatives and neighbors, 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 I started from scratch: no official surveys, no information campaigns, no standards, no safety regulations, 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 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 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 newly built pools, and by January 2006 for swimming pools built before January 1, 2004.

When I managed to meet Jean-Pierre in October 1997 he was a senator and not personally involved with drownings! He told me that he agreed 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 the public about the danger of swimming pools and let us try to do without a law to reduce the number of victims.”

He was expecting the pool owners to change their attitudes and protect their swimming pools with 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!

Many felt that accidents only happen to the “others,” to those irresponsible parents who are not able to look after their children.
French people also feel strongly that they can do whatever they want in their own homes, and that they are even allowed not to secure their swimming pools if they don’t feel like it.

I also 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 president of a group of parents in Toulon at a symposium entitled “Private swimming pools and young children’s 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, 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, if for no other reason!

In his first bills, Jean-Pierre 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 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 “Be aware of your happiness.”

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.

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 into advocacy.”

I would like to share other words with you, written by an Irish soldier to his lover, which perfectly express my own feelings and the reasons why I am able to speak at this 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.

Your 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.”

Pérouème founded and currently serves as president of Sauve-Qui-Veut. Sauve-Qui-Veut aims at preventing children from drowning and at supporting victims’ families. She graduated from Paris Sorbonne University with a master’s degree in applied foreign languages. She is the mother of three children. Simultaneously with her professional experience as sales manager in such areas as clothing and office furniture, as well as operating a human resources consultancy, she has always been involved in implementing a drowning prevention policy in France.