

Just Say No, Please Say No



Photo: Paul Hellstern

"I walked out and yelled, 'For God's sake, shoot me!'"

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Oct. 9, 1989, started like any other morning. Little did I know that by the end of the day, my life and that of each member of my family would be changed forever.

I had borrowed a tractor and a rotary mower to trim the weeds and grass so I could see the lane leading from our house to the road. Before I started, my three kids—Kenneth, Jr., "BoBo," 8; Mandy, 9; and Ashley, 5—begged me for a ride on the tractor. "Just once," they pleaded. I said "no" several times, and they didn't ask anymore.

After a day of alternating mowing with other chores, I decided to finish the mowing job. The kids started asking again for a ride.

"Please, Dad, let us ride. We want to help you," they said.

It was about 7 p.m., and for some reason I gave in. I said, "OK, kids. This is the last round; I'll let you ride."

I held Ashley on my lap, and BoBo and Mandy sat on the fenders. I made them promise to hang on tight, and they agreed.

As we rode, we talked about things that fathers and children talk about. I told them, "I want you to know one thing. I love you guys, no matter whatever happens."

About 30 seconds later, the fender BoBo sat on broke off. As he lunged forward, he reached out his little left hand. I yelled his name as I reached for him and his fingers slipped through mine.

BoBo went face down in the field, the fender went underneath the tractor wheel, and then the big wheel ran over him—up the legs, up the back, and over the top of his little head.

Then the rotary mower went over him. If you've ever seen anyone who's stepped on a landmine, well, there's more left of that person than of anyone who has fallen in the path of a mower.

The tractor finally came to a stop, and I sent the two girls to tell their mother. I tried to pick up my son, and he was just all over the place. It was like standing on the outside watching myself do these stupid things. I lost my mind.

I went immediately to my house to get my pistol. In my mind I had just murdered my son. I had to shoot myself for what I had done. I tore the house up looking for that gun. Fortunately, a friend had beaten me to it. I then looked for my rifle, but they had taken that too.

When I couldn't find a gun, I went outside, and there were local cops, photographers, reporters, and emergency medical personnel. According to witnesses, I walked out and yelled, "For God's sake, shoot me!"

They got me into the emergency medical service unit, and I spent the night in a little padded room in the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Someone watched me all night. I remember looking for a place to hang myself.

It's been almost a year, and the hurting is still there. I haven't had eight straight hours of sleep since then. The life that was once fun to live doesn't hold much for me now. It is like my heart has been cut out of my chest.

I lost my dad some years ago, and it hurt, but not as much as losing my son. The loss of a child is about the worst thing that can ever happen to a person.

To others who might be tempted to give a child just one ride, my advice is to be firm and refuse. If you can say "no," then the accident that happened to our family won't happen to yours. In fact, don't even allow your children to be with you at all when you operate dangerous equipment.

Remember my story the next time a child begs for "just one ride" on farm machinery. That one ride took my son to the gates of heaven. Don't let it take yours.

K.T. Reynolds lives on a farm in rural Sperry, Okla., and works as an airplane mechanic for American Airlines.

In an effort to prevent other children from being injured or killed, *Progressive Farmer* now sponsors the *Progressive Farmer Safety Day Camp*® program. If you would like information about this program, please call 1-888-257-3529 or visit our website at <http://farmsafetyday.ac.iastate.edu>