



Gun safety comes too late for dad

By MARK HORNICKEL

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As a federal police officer, Michael Lesnick always hoped he would never have to shoot someone.

But on the morning of Nov. 29, 2007, he was faced with something much worse. His 3-year-old son, Joshua, found his father's gun in a bedroom nightstand, shot himself in the chest and died.

"After this happened, I didn't want to look in the mirror," Lesnick, 43, of Kenosha, said in a recent interview. "I see my son's killer every day when I look in the mirror. I did everything but pull the trigger, but put the gun in his hand."

Lesnick, who said he wanted to share his experience now because he has completed his court sentence, is trying to relay his story to other gun owners — particularly law enforcement officers, who might have become as complacent with their guns as he says he did.

"The message is about keeping guns secured and put away," said Lesnick, who spent six years working as a federal police officer in North Chicago and was a certified firearms instructor.

"Familiarity breeds contempt and complacency. Cops are handling guns all the time. Sometimes you get lax wearing body armor, and I just want to remind everybody of the safety procedures."

In June 2008, Lesnick was sentenced to one year of probation after pleading no contest to a misdemeanor charge for keeping a loaded firearm near a child, as a party to the crime. A judge also ordered him to pay a \$500 fine and have counseling.

Lesnick's wife, Jessica, 35, pleaded guilty to the same crime and was sentenced to 18 months probation in August 2008. She declined to be interviewed for this story.

Fateful night

According to reports, police were called to the Lesnicks' Kenosha home on Nov. 29, 2007, after Joshua suffered a single gunshot wound. He was taken to St. Catherine's Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead.

Michael Lesnick was at work at the time. Jessica Lesnick, who was at home with Joshua and the couple's 5-year-old son, reportedly was in a second-floor bathroom when the shot from the .40-caliber semi-automatic gun rang out. She then found Joshua lying on the floor of her bedroom.

The 5-year-old was not in the room with Joshua and was not hurt.

As a toddler, Joshua was so curious, his parents nicknamed him "Monkey Moo," his father remembered. A week before his death, Lesnick caught the boy after he'd dragged a kitchen chair to a countertop and climbed it to reach for some candy stored above the refrigerator.

"Josh was an incredible baby," Lesnick said. "He was a wonderful, inquisitive little boy. Everybody that ever met him fell in love with him. He touched so many."

On the day he died, Joshua had gone into his parents' bedroom, Lesnick believes, to look for a pair of flashlights he and his brother loved to play with. Lesnick kept the flashlights in a nightstand next to a box that held the gun. Joshua had never gone into the bedroom before, and Lesnick never thought one of his boys would attempt to handle the gun.

"The boys were fascinated with them," Lesnick said of the flashlights. "I did not think they had the physical strength to fire that gun. I relied on a very bad idea."

Gun locks not in use

A judge said Lesnick had gun locks in the house but was not using them. Lesnick's attorney argued the father kept loaded firearms within reach in case he had to thwart an attacker in his home, and that gun locks or keeping the guns unloaded would have compromised his response time.

"I wish that it was locked," Lesnick says now. "There are safes, and for those who cannot afford gun locks or safes, 99 percent of police departments across the nation will give you a gun lock for your firearm."

The Lesnicks cooperated fully with authorities, and Michael Lesnick said he has no immediate reaction to observers who think their court sentences were too harsh. Most people have reacted in two extremes — they hold him and his wife responsible for Joshua's death, or they feel the parents' pain, Lesnick said.

"It's not like I was Joe Crackhead," he said. "This was a mistake. That's an understatement. A gun in a bedside nightstand is not in the plan."

Trying to recover

Since Joshua's death, the family has struggled to recover the lives they knew.

The tragedy hurt the Lesnicks' marriage, and the couple is divorcing. After Joshua's death, Jessica Lesnick also was caught shoplifting multiple times; court records show she was charged with retail theft five times, but two of those charges were later dismissed, and she pleaded guilty to the others.

"The way she dealt with it was very different than the way I dealt with it," Lesnick said. "It caused the death of our marriage."

Lesnick wants to return to law enforcement but realizes he may not get that opportunity now. He had left his federal police job about a year before Joshua's death and had been working a security job at the time.

"A conviction makes it hard to return to that field," he said. "I still want to help people. I still want to get that message out."

Message resonates

Lesnick has dispatched his story to law enforcement friends and networks across the country. He's received numerous responses, including one from an Arkansas sheriff's deputy who said he woke up his wife and had her move his two guns into a locked case above a closet.

"You may well have prevented similar tragedies," the deputy and father of two young children wrote to Lesnick. "They never have touched my firearms before, so I have become lax in putting them away. ... I probably would not have thought twice about it had it not been for you."

In spite of the tragedy, Lesnick said he remains a supporter of gun ownership and gun rights. He also wishes Wisconsin would join the majority of states in the country by creating a concealed-carry law. Only Wisconsin and Illinois do not issue concealed-carry permits.

"Ultimately I would like to see Wisconsin join the rest of the country in creating a concealed-carry law so that Joe and Judy citizen can legally (carry a weapon)," he said.

But Lesnick said his son's death has put a renewed emphasis on gun safety and education. He acknowledges guns should be secured and kept away from ammunition to prevent similar accidents.

"It needs to be secure so that no one can get their hands on it," Lesnick said. "It would have been no less a tragedy if someone had stolen a gun and shot someone's son."

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