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Foreword

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Foreword

FOREWORD

ANN BROWN*

As Chairman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), my goal has been to keep families, and especially children, safe.

Since I became Chairman in 1994, we have committed major resources—over forty percent of CPSC’s budget—to activities that protect children. And we are making a difference. I am proud that U.S. hospital emergency room-treated injuries from nursery products have dropped twenty percent since I took office. This is the first such decrease in injuries to children under age five since CPSC began keeping records in 1973.

Of course, our mission covers not only children, but people of all ages. We oversee approximately 15,000 types of consumer products that people use in their homes, for sports and elsewhere. Each year, there are over 29 million injuries and over 22,000 deaths related to those products. Our job is to save lives and reduce product-related injuries for all consumers.

But protecting children is the part of my job that is dearest to my heart. This focus on our youngest citizens grows out of my experience as a consumer activist—and out of my life experience as a woman, mother and grandmother.

Many years ago, my then baby daughter Laura nearly swallowed a part of a toy that looked like a piece of cherry candy, but was actually a bright red glue pellet from a paint set. Since then, I have worried about unsafe toys. It was that experience that got me started on my career as an advocate for safe consumer products.

In those days, more women stayed home all day with their young children. So, instead of applying for the position of Chairman of

* Ann Brown has served as Chairman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission since 1994. She will be leaving the Commission on November 1 to set up a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization called SAFE—A Safer America for Everyone.

CPSC (which did not even exist back then), I hired myself for the unpaid job of compiling a yearly report on the safety of toys and children's products. I worked on this at home, between diaper changes and during naptime.

Later, I served in other consumer organizations—as Vice-Chairman of the Consumer Federation of America for fifteen years, and as chairman of the board of Public Voice, a food safety advocacy group. As an advocate for children's safety in the 1970s, I realized that most people viewed product safety, particularly children's safety, as a "woman's issue." In those days, I believe women, especially at-home mothers, worked very effectively on children's safety. Many of us were willing to assume volunteer roles in disseminating information and speaking out about problems.

But over time, the cultural and political landscape changed. Women entered the working world in greater numbers. Now women were running banks and litigating cases. They were still worrying about their kids' safety, but fewer of them were available to do the work as volunteers.

Fortunately, help arrived with the creation of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1973. Now, the government stepped in to play a role, and safety could no longer be dismissed. During the 1970s, several other health and safety agencies were created to protect consumers—for example, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Today, children's safety concerns have moved to center stage. Now, both fathers and mothers are researching the safety of their children's cribs and swing sets and supporting efforts to strengthen safety. Consumers support grass roots initiatives and weigh in with their complaints and their purchases. Legislators of both political parties support efforts to strengthen laws that protect children—like the 1994 Child Safety Protection Act. Children's product manufacturers pay attention to possible safety hazards in their high chairs and toys.

And the media is paying attention. We at CPSC do our best to get attention for our recalls—on television, radio, the Internet, features in newspapers. That is why I frequently appear on television morning shows to announce recalls of children's products. We especially admire what the morning shows and major newspapers have done to feature recalls and inform millions of consumers about important product safety news.

I think our administration at CPSC can take credit for the new higher profile of product safety, especially as it concerns children's

products. There is a solid difference at CPSC since we arrived in 1994. When I was sworn in, I wondered if a fifty-seven-year-old grandmother could turn around an agency that had won little public notice for its work, but that had gotten stinging, bipartisan and largely justified criticism for years. After seven years working with CPSC's excellent and dedicated staff, I am proud to look back and say, "We have done it."

Once again, CPSC is setting the agenda for safety. We have used a carrot and stick approach. We have relied—very successfully—on cooperation with industry to achieve many major safety advances. But we have not hesitated to be tough when we had to be. We have not shied away from using our power to levy civil penalties on companies that fail to report injuries to children; we have not hesitated to go the regulatory route when voluntary approaches to safety fail.

But children's safety remains a very personal endeavor for me. For example, I personally telephone and meet with the parents of children who have died in a tragedy associated with a consumer product. It isn't an easy thing to do. Whether a male head of CPSC or any other safety agency would do this, I don't know. I only know that I want to reach out to these parents, share in their grief, and offer them a way to help other parents avoid similar tragedies.

We now have an army of parents who have chosen to help us make products safer. One is Thelma Sibley, whose five-year old daughter Nancy died when the strings of her jacket caught on her playground slide and strangled her. Thelma worked with me to ask manufacturers to voluntarily remove the strings from children's garments. They agreed, and within months had replaced the strings with hooks and eyes, snaps and Velcro. Another is Lynn Starks. Her three-year old daughter Whitney died when she wiggled her body between the top slats of the upper bunk of her bunk bed, and got her head caught and strangled. Lynn never stopped working to outlaw unsafe bunk beds, until the CPSC passed a regulation prohibiting the production and sale of the kind of bed that killed Whitney.

These are the human faces of tragedy. They are the people behind the statistics of consumers injured and killed each year. And they are what motivates me to do my job, to ensure that no other children will die the way these children did.

I know that men and women react differently to these issues. When I speak to bar association groups, as just one example, the female attorneys come up to me afterwards more often than their male counterparts to talk about the safety of their own kids.

I am a woman and the Chairman of the CPSC. Both roles are extremely important to me. More significantly, the two roles are important to each other. I know I am a better woman for having had the chance to serve the public and advance the cause of product safety. And I'm definitely a better public servant for having been a wife, a mother and a grandmother. I try to apply the lessons I've learned in all those roles every day that I come to work at CPSC.