

Erin Runnion

Age: 31

Company/Organization: The Joyful Child Foundation

Family: Husband, Kenneth Donnelly; a 14-year-old daughter, 9-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter; Samantha would have been 10 this year.

Hobbies: Dancing, refinishing furniture, yoga

What influential person would you like to meet and what would you ask him/her: TBD

Erin Runnion was thrust into the public spotlight for the worst of reasons. On July 15, 2002, her 5-year-old daughter, Samantha, was snatched, kicking and screaming, out of her front yard by a sex offender and found murdered days later. Her story shook the entire nation and brought to light the frightening reality that there are evil people living among us whose singular purpose is to harm our children.

While a tragedy of this magnitude would paralyze most people, Erin was moved to action and has become a passionate advocate for tougher laws on crimes against children. As a tribute to Samantha, she founded The Joyful Child Foundation, whose mission is to make neighborhoods safer places for our children to grow up in through organized child watches called PRIDES.

“I’m doing all this because Samantha can’t. She wasn’t the only one and she’s not going to be the last,” Erin explains. “I have to make sure she didn’t go through all this for nothing.”

Her tireless work is paying off. In June, President Bush signed into law The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, a bill lobbied for heavily by Erin, Mark Klaus and Mark Lunsford, whose daughters were also murdered by sex offenders. It will create a national Internet database of convicted child molesters, making it easier to track the whereabouts of the country's 500,000 convicted sex offenders.

But there's more work to be done closer to home, Erin says. Currently, she's lobbying fiercely against California's version of Jessica's Law, on the ballot in November. She says the proposition is flawed, particularly the proposed residency restriction, which will require sex offenders to wear GPS tracking devices and prohibit them from living within 2,000 feet of a school or park. Erin is adamant that the residency restriction remains at 1,000 feet so that we can keep a better eye on these predators.

In the last three years, Erin has poured her heart and soul into the Samantha's PRIDE child watch program. So far, more than 500 volunteers have become PRIDE protectors in Southern California – parents who take turns watching children before and after school, on weekends, at parks and at public pools. And it's working. In Riverside County, the largest PRIDE, six of eight sex offenders have moved out of that area in just one year.

Erin shares her vision: "My dream is for all our neighborhoods to get organized so predators don't have the opportunity to victimize."

By Lynn Armitage