Opinion

NCR Voices



Mary Maura Grimaldi, or Sissy, as her family called her, in a photo by older brother, Michael Grimaldi (Michael Grimaldi)



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A school-age child died of measles.

I am not speaking of the case in Lubbock, Texas, last month.

This was 62 years ago in Kansas City, Missouri, and she was my sister.

The recent death in West Texas was reminiscent of the death of Mary Maura Grimaldi, who died of encephalitis caused by measles in March 1963. Sissy, as we called her, was 6 years old.

Sissy was not vaccinated because the vaccine was not available. In fact, in a strange twist of fate, the vaccine was released to the American public the very day she died.

She did not have a chance.

The child in Texas, who has not been identified, did have a chance. That child could have been vaccinated, but was not. We don't know why — if vaccine skepticism or poverty or lack of access led to the failure to be vaccinated.

Either way, Covenant Children's Hospital chief executive officer Dr. Amy Thompson, a pediatrician, told the Associated Press that the death "is a big deal."

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Sadly, our new secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services did not seem to agree, and downplayed the tragedy in West Texas by saying such outbreaks are "not unusual." This comment came before a second person -- who was unvaccinated and tested positive for measles -- died in New Mexico on Thursday, the state health department told local media.

Let's talk about what it means to lose a child.

My mother said you never get over the loss of a child. An overwhelming depression fell upon my mother, like a mountain she could never climb, she told me.

A devout Catholic, her salvation came through prayer and the help of a nun. I asked her once, "Did you see a counselor?" Well, in the 1960s, psychotherapy was not popular, but she did talk to someone, a Roman Catholic sister. It was through those discussions with a nun — and let's be honest, those were Mom's therapy sessions — her life was saved, I believe.

Mom, who died at age 99 a little over a year ago, did not remember who that sister was, but God love that woman. There's a special place in heaven for that nun.

Take note, please, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. This is a long way of going to say that Sissy's death was more than unusual, Mr. Kennedy.

It was devastating.

> Sissy's death was more than unusual, Mr. Kennedy. It was devastating.
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So yet another measles outbreak and here I am again.

I have to tell this sad story every few years because of ignorance, a misreading of science and politicians eager to exploit doubt in government to gain power. Yes, negative vaccine reactions are a real thing, but very rare. Some shots do make kids sick, but the risk of the vaccine pales in comparison to the risk of the disease. And this is a case where the only way we are all safe is if we vaccinate virtually everyone.

The facts are the facts. Indisputably, the best way to stop an outbreak and community spread is through vaccinations. Measles is one of the most contagious and deadly diseases. And misguided individuals who think they can prevent this deadly childhood disease through vitamins or voodoo supplements are playing roulette with their kids' lives.

Sissy did not have a chance.

Your children do.

Get your children vaccinated.