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Walk your child to school today and set an example for kids -- and everyone else

Today is International Walk to School Day, and this morning, weather permitting, my first-grader and I will walk from our home to Franklin Elementary School in central Bakersfield.

As we do as often as we can, at least several times a week, my almost-6-year-old and I will push her little sister's stroller down sidewalk-less streets to the crosswalk at A and 24th streets and wait. We wait for all four lanes of morning rush hour traffic to and from downtown to clear, which can take a while. The painted lines of the crosswalk, the reflective black and yellow of the school crossing signs, and the flashing yellow light high above the street sign that is only active twice a day have no slowing effect on passing drivers who barely seem to notice them.

Last year, a kindly older gentleman was on crossing guard duty here. He'd walk out into the street with his orange vest and sign and blow his whistle when it was safe for us to cross. He'd ask if my younger daughter and I were coming back this way and needed him to stay to safeguard our way home. Even his presence, however, wasn't enough to prevent a multi-vehicle fender-bender that occurred when he stepped into the street to stop traffic for us once. Apparently, though, we were the only ones using this school crossing last year, and so now, 24th Street and A is without a crossing guard, and we are left to wait. Once in a while, a conscientious driver slows and stops when he or she sees us waiting at the corner, scanning for a break in traffic. Last week, a driver in the westbound lane closest to us saw that both eastbound lanes were clear and stopped to let us cross while we could; the police car in the next lane, however, did not see fit to follow suit.

International Walk to School Day is meant to publicize the need for walkable, and bikeable, communities. Whether one walks to combat childhood obesity by getting kids and families moving, to improve the environment by using alternative modes of transportation, or to build community by creating, maintaining and using safer streets, thousands across the country and the world are walking today to demand safer routes to schools for all and to build a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly culture. Here in Bakersfield, however, where we live in sidewalk-free subdivisions far from the amenities and workplaces to which we must drive, we face an uphill battle to change our culture, our infrastructure and communities. Among the only local events for International Walk to School Day, if not the only one, is Panama-Buena Vista Union School District's "walking school buses," in which students will walk to school in organized groups accompanied by adults. Last November, the organization Transportation for America ranked Bakersfield the most dangerous metropolitan area in California in which to walk.

When my daughter began kindergarten last year, I thought that it would be a wonderful experience for us to walk the almost straight, less-than-a-mile route from our home to her school at least once a week. Sometimes, she chose to ride her bike alongside her sister's stroller, which we would then secure in the school's disused bicycle lock-up, all on its own. She enjoyed the experience so much that this year, some weeks she chooses walking over driving more days than not. As autumn arrives, it is truly a joy to see her and her sister enjoy the outdoors, observe her neighborhood, and for both of us to get some needed exercise. I know that we are privileged to have that choice, as many of her schoolmates do not. I know that it does not make economic sense to pay for a crossing guard to safeguard a crossing hardly anyone uses. But I also know that we need to change the attitudes and fix the structural problems that make it easier to not walk than to walk.

For more information, visit International Walk to School in the U.S.A. at walktoschool.org; the National Center for Safe Routes to Schools at saferoutesinfo.org; the Walking School Bus at walkingschoolbus.org; and Bike Bakersfield Safe Routes to Schools at bikebakersfield.org. We'll see you at the crosswalk.

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