CAPTURING AMERICA'S MOST WANTED

Author, victim advocate, and crime-fighter John Walsh, host of "America's Most Wanted," shares his thoughts on the parking industry and catching the bad guys.

Watch true-crime television for any amount of time, and it won't be long before John Walsh appears on the screen. He left his career in the hotel industry to fight crime full-time after his son, Adam, was abducted from a Hollywood, Fla., Sears store and murdered in 1981; the case went unsolved for 27 years.

PHOTO BY REGGIE SAUNDERS

Walsh is a founder and board of directors member of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. He launched the hit "America's Most Wanted" television show in 1988, and is credited with capturing more than 1,200 fugitives and finding more than 50 missing children. He was named Man of the Year by both the U.S. Marshals Service and the FBI, and is one of only a handful of honorary U.S. Marshals. He's also been honored by four U.S. presidents: Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. He and his wife, Neve, played central roles in the passage of the federal Adam Walsh Child Protection Safety Act, which was signed into law 25 years to the day after Adam Walsh disappeared.

He recently sat down with *The Parking Professional* to talk about the industry's role in fighting crime.

***The Parking Professional*: The International Parking Institute (IPI) partnered with the federal Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Department of Homeland Security to offer First Observer anti-terrorism training to more than 12,500 parking professionals at no charge. How is that valuable in terms of keeping citizens safe?**

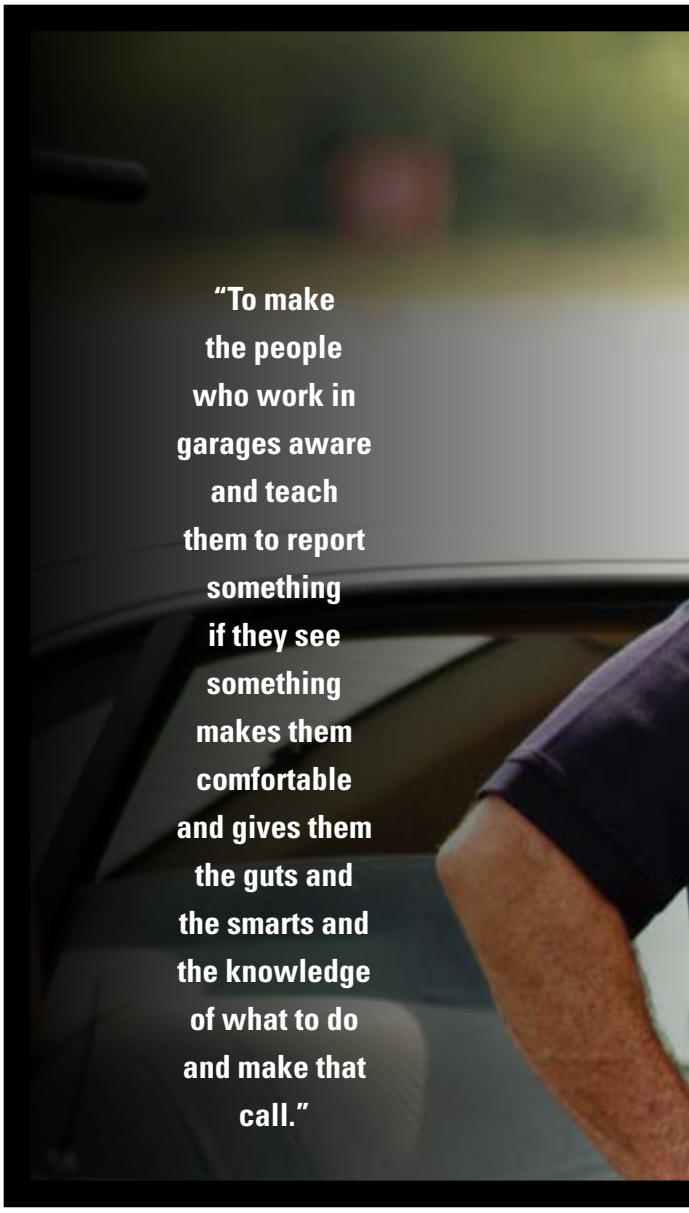
JOHN WALSH: I think it's a great program and a terrific service. I've learned one big thing by doing "America's Most Wanted" for 25 years: the public can be a tremendous asset to finding the bad guys. We've caught more than 1,200 guys simply by asking every week and telling people they can make a difference. What you've done with Homeland Security is vitally important to teaching people who work in structures and the people they work with and associate with to keep their eyes and ears open.

We started profiling terrorists in 1993 when a blind sheik tried to take the twin towers down the first time, and that was from a parking garage. I saw that garage first-hand. To make the people who work in garages aware and teach them to report something if they see something makes them comfortable and gives them the guts and the smarts and the knowledge of what to do and make that call.

***TPP*: What do you think the role of parking professionals is or could be in fighting other kinds of crime?**

JW: The role of parking professionals is a huge one. So many crimes are crimes of opportunity. So many are crimes against vulnerable women, and so many times, predators try to use parking garages to commit those crimes. Women in particular are extremely vulnerable to these guys.

Parking attendants need to be on the lookout using



the tools they have to see if something's out of the ordinary. I'm a great advocate of cameras. Great Britain has closed-circuit television cameras in many residential parking structures and public areas, and those cameras are monitored by the police. Chicago adopted camera surveillance and has installed more than 1,000 cameras around the city. You have to teach staff and people who operate parking structures first, in all the positive sides to cameras, and second, what to do when you're working in a structure that has cameras. Parking professionals should be trained in what to do if they see someone checking out cars or lurking among the cars—what do you do, and how fast do you do it?

We covered a crime a few years ago when someone was abducted from a store. It was a national chain and they had cameras in the store, and that helped solve the case. But the problem was that the director of security bought the least expensive cameras and there was so much pixelation that mall security couldn't see the guy and they lost him. Also, 13 cameras weren't functional.

IPI is very proactive—you have to be. They way you reduce crime is to be proactive. You train your staff,

you train your people in your structures, and you spend that extra dime on cameras so you have something you can review. Both England and Chicago have seen their conviction rates accelerate because they have these things on tape.

***TPP*: Why are garages attractive to criminals? What can owners, managers, and staff to do to try and make them less attractive?**

JW: It's a place to get people when they're unaware. The bad guys can hide and stay relatively anonymous, do their crime in a short time, and get a big payoff—money, gifts, credit cards. It's easy. And a parking structure is a good place to hide and a place where women are vulnerable, particularly at night.

Parking is a business, and it needs to train people how to deal with this. The best structures have people who patrol and visible signs of cameras and surveillance even if the cameras aren't real. Burglars and muggers will pick a place that doesn't have a sign that says "covered by surveillance cameras." They pick a place where there isn't security.

It's important to train parking professionals to keep their eyes and ears open and teach them what to do if they see something, which is to call 911 right away. I've addressed the National Emergency Number Association several times, and they always say if you see a potential crime, call 911 immediately. They don't want you to call 911 to unplug a toilet, they don't want to get your cat out of the trees, but if there's a crime in progress or it looks like someone might be committing a crime, they'll respond in a minute.

If you have multiple structures, partner with the police department. It's a very good thing to ask the local police or the sheriff what you can do, and to establish a better relationship between them and your director of security or personnel. Ask if there's a special number you can call, can you visit the 911 operation, can a deputy visit your facility to give you ideas of how you can improve your security. Ask if there's a way they can help you be less vulnerable.

We worked on a 2007 case where a woman and child were abducted from a mall garage in Boca Raton, Fla., and

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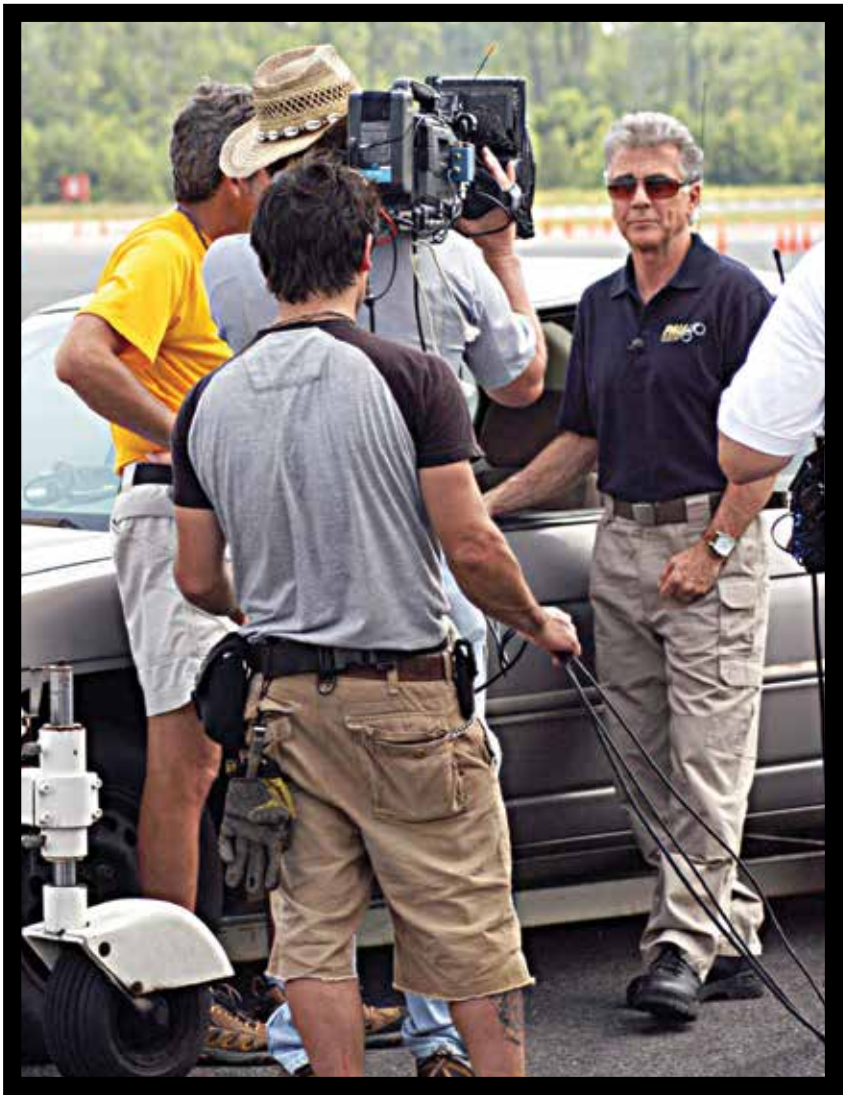

murdered. It's a very high-end mall, and it was the middle of the day. Another woman and boy had been kidnapped before in that garage, but the guy didn't kill them. People are now suing the mall owner. I think that, in response to the kidnappings, he installed better lighting and security and cameras, but it's too late. Being proactive and reaching out to find out how you can improve your security is a very smart move to try and reduce your potential for crime and for litigation. We all have mothers or daughters or sisters, and we all want them to be safe.

***TPP*: A common statistic we hear is that one in 10 crimes happens in a parking garage. Is that accurate?**

JW: A lot of statistics about crimes are guesstimations. They come from reports to chiefs of police, but lots of times I feel reporting is inaccurate. People try and reduce those numbers because they're always bad for business and not good for anybody's job. I believe a lot of crime statistics go unreported. It took a federal act to get colleges to accurately report crimes on their campuses, and the FBI believes many still don't report because it affects donations and admissions. So it's hard to get a real handle on crime numbers. That said, I think it's a lot more than are reported. People are reluctant to say they went back to their cars and the presents they had inside were gone because they weren't savvy enough or educated enough or aware enough to lock their doors. They don't want to report that they did something stupid.

"The number-one thing I would say to parking attendants is that you have the right to speak up."

***TPP*: There are parking professionals throughout our communities: in private facilities, at hospitals, throughout universities, at airports, and in cities and towns. We've heard stories of those workers stopping child abductions by being observant. What should set off an alarm that they may be witnessing an abduction?**

JW: I think it's a wonderful thing that you and others teach parking professionals about this. I've worked in hundreds of cases since my son was abducted, and kids can be gone in the one minute that nobody was paying attention. We had so many false tips in my son's case that said he was grabbed into a blue van. There was never a blue van. It was a white Cadillac. Twenty-seven years later when we finally figured it out, the man who killed Adam had already died on death row. People were well-intended, but didn't give good information on what they saw. A trained parking professional might have made a difference.

The number-one thing I would say to parking attendants is that you have the right to speak up. Imagine seeing someone grabbing a child who's screaming and you didn't want to say anything because it might have been a relative, and finding out later that child was abducted. All you have to do is say, "What's going on here?" or ask the child if this person is their parent or their uncle, especially if the child is terrified. You could save a child's life.

Parking lot attendants have to be encouraged to get involved. If they see someone dragging a child who's screaming or grabbing a child, they have the authority to ask—it's their garage.

Police tell us that it's hard to get good information. It's important to stay calm and

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take a good look if you think there's an abduction or a child kidnapping or a mugging going on. The most important thing for parking attendants is to stay calm and write it down. What did the guy look like? What was he wearing? What was his build? We all get confused and think he had a mustache when he didn't or that he was five-foot-10 when he was really five-foot-four. I've done it. The first four hours are crucial, because the majority of abducted kids are dead in four hours. Good information is critical. The parking lot attendant can have that good information—he took off in a red van, for example. It would be great if they could get a license plate. As a result of Amber Alerts, which took six years through Congress to get passed, 17 kids who'd been abducted were saved in the first year, because somebody observed it.

Adam Walsh

***TPP*: You've clearly made a tremendous difference in fighting crime over the years. How can parking professionals affect their communities?**

JW: One person can absolutely make a difference. I've seen it 1,200-plus times and for more than 50 missing children. Someone cared enough and was well-trained enough and courageous enough to make that call and do the right thing. You have to give people rules and tips—if you feel uncomfortable, here's what you do. They have to have a game plan. It's one thing to say what they did was all wrong, but it's another to say, "Here's the right way to handle this." People say you should be brave and risk your life, but you don't have to risk your life.

Give your employees a call to action and show they what they need to do, and then reinforce it. If you can, without risking your life, yell or intercede or make noise. Tell them here's what you do when you see something, here's who you call, here's where you write it down.

All the experts agree on the one thing people should yell when they need help. We've done many segments on safety and it applies in a parking structure: you yell "fire." People will come. They look at "help," because they're reluctant to get involved, but they'll help you if they hear "fire." If you see a man choking a woman and you're afraid to just start yelling, ask them what they're doing. You might save a life. You scream at somebody, blast an airhorn if you have it, whatever you can do to distract that criminal. That perpetrator knows somebody's seen them. Most of the time, those guys are cowards. They're praying people won't get involved and they won't be seen. In cases we've been involved with where someone's created a ruckus, most of the kids involved are alive today.

The key witness in a parking lot is going to be the attendant, and he or she has to keep a calm head. He can talk to other people there: "Let's sit down and talk about this. Let me get my pad and my pen, and you tell me what he looked like—was he dark, blond, redhead, short, tall, chunky? What did the car look like?" That's good, solid information.

***TPP*: The parking industry has embraced technologies such as cameras and license plate recognition (LPR) as enforcement tools. Is there potential for those technologies to fight crime?**

JW: There's huge potential. When Adam was abducted, people thought they got on the turnpike. This was 1981: there were no cameras, there was no DNA. The technological advancements we have today are a huge tool for law enforcement and that can be a home run. Now you know who was in that lot or that garage on that day. In the Boca Raton case I mentioned earlier, one of the women who survived gave a good composite of the guy. Imagine if they had cameras or license plate recognition. They would have had had it down.

I urge people who own or manage parking lots and garages to go that extra yard, spend that extra money, and install cameras and license plate recognition. Spend the extra money on training your staff to make your parking structure safer and, from a purely mercenary business standpoint, it'll reduce your liability exposure too. You could be a deterrent. If you have a guy who steals stuff from cars and you have good cameras or good technology, you might be able to catch that guy.

***TPP*: Why should parking managers invest in anti-crime training on a local level for their staff members? How can the parking industry help educate the public about safety and crime?**

JW: I hunt people down for a living after they hurt people. I'm a believer in being proactive and that means people have to be knowledgeable. I've said it for years—knowledge is power. It can be as simple as handing out flyers of do's and don'ts or teaming up with law enforcement to make people more aware, all of it helps. The more sophisticated garage operators are and the more they put into being proactive, the more benefit everybody gets. The structures are safer, there are fewer lawsuits, and they have staff who knows what to do when they see something going on. Crime can affect anybody anywhere. From a Neiman Marcus garage in Boca to the middle of Manhattan, crime affects everybody.

***TPP*: What role can IPI play in helping the industry fight crime?**

JW: Take a proactive stance. That's what you've got to do. Parking lots and structures share value, and we have an obligation to make them as safe as possible. People in the industry should avail themselves of what IPI offers, certainly, and train their staff. Sometimes employees are helpful and on the ball, and other times they're people from other countries who can't help you. They want to, but they have no idea how or what to do. It's an obligation, and I congratulate the owners who are doing a great job and being very proactive.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN WALSH