

San Antonio Express-News (Texas)

May 16, 2000, Tuesday , METRO

Dad returns abducted child;Made decision after reading news story

BYLINE: Alison Gregor

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 752 words

Laura Garcia spotted her mother, sprinted toward her and launched her 8-year-old body into her mother's arms.

They tumbled over together in the middle of a Target parking lot Monday night in Buda.

A reunion of a mother and daughter after three years is a loving - if not a decorous - thing.

"As soon as she saw me, her face lit up," said Norma Luna, her voice shaking with excitement. "She just ran to me and said 'Mama!'

"She recognized me right away. She jumped on me, and we both fell over. People were looking at us like we were crazy."

Laura was abducted by her father, Joel Garcia, in 1997 and taken into Mexico.

Left behind were Luna and Garcia's 5-year-old son, Joel Garcia Jr. - a family shattered, as are thousands annually by international parental child abductions.

Then came a phone call Monday afternoon.

Garcia, Luna's former boyfriend, had read an article last week in the San Antonio Express-News about their broken family, Luna said.

The images shook him, and he realized Laura needed to be back home with her mother, brother and new 1-year-old sister, Breanna Baeza, she said.

"Laura said when her daddy saw them (the articles), he started crying," Luna said Monday night, her daughter safe in her arms.

Joel Jr. missed his big sister so much he created an imaginary friend with whom he would spend hours discussing Laura.

Monday night, he was ecstatic she was back home.

"I found her," he said triumphantly, having a hearty romp with his big sister, whose nickname is "Wita."

Luna said the caveat to Garcia's return of Laura was that she drop all charges against him for child abduction.

Garcia has a federal warrant out for his arrest for interference with child custody.

She didn't give it a second thought, readily agreeing to the terms.

"I'm just so excited," she said. "It's so unbelievable."

Garcia did not attend the reunion. His father returned the little girl to her mother.

Luna said Garcia couldn't face losing Laura, and he is now spending time alone.

"I can understand that," she said.

Luna said Laura now speaks only Spanish after spending almost three years attending a Mexican school. Since Joel Jr. speaks only English, the two will have an intercambio, or exchange, and teach each other, she said.

As Luna faces her future with her family restored, she said she understands the plight of others who aren't so lucky.

People such as John Trout, whose blond-curled, 5-year-old daughter Vivian Trout remains lost, perhaps in Costa Rica or Spain. She has been kidnapped, not once, but twice, by her mother, Marina Lopez.

Bill Sandige agonizes over whether he will ever again see his two children, 11-year-old Margaret and 6-year-old William. They were taken to Mexico by his ex-wife, Isabel Leon, five years ago.

Steven Slinkard suspects his three children - 11-year-old Andrew, 9-year-old Nathan and 7-year-old Sydney - were whisked away to Mexico by his ex-wife, Trena. They have been gone almost five years now.

Just like children, the cases come in all shapes and sizes, but the underlying theme is the same: One parent, who does not have custody, steals a child from another parent and takes the child abroad.

In this country, there are 1,100 unresolved cases, and hundreds more are reported each year, according to government statistics.

Many additional cases go unreported, children's advocates say.

The number is increasing, said Christopher Lamora, a spokesman with the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs.

According to the Texas attorney general's office, Laura was one of eight children who were abducted from Texas and taken to Mexico by noncustodial

parents and who had not been returned. Dozens more have been taken to other foreign countries.

Figures from the State Department indicate that only 24 percent of the children spirited abroad are returned or given access to their parent in the United States.

Luna hopes that will change, possibly with more attention focused on the problem.

"I want to thank all those people who helped me," she said. "I understand exactly the way those other parents feel.

"I just hope that every parent who has taken a child realizes what they've done to the child and that it's better they bring the child back and they try to work things out - because the children are the ones who are hurt."