

Joy and Fear

Reunion is only the first step in living happily ever after

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Rooms are starting to overflow in Norma Luna's house. A kitchen is cluttered with groceries, and a child's bedroom is littered with toys and books.

Life changes quickly when there's a young addition to the family.

But in Luna's case, it's not a newborn. It's the return of her 8-year-old daughter, Laura Garcia, who was kidnapped by her father, Joel Garcia, 26, in 1997 and hidden in Mexico for almost three years.

And Luna is learning that, despite the fairytale quality of her joyful reunion with her daughter Monday, the saga has just begun.

"There's still fear," she said last week. "I'm still scared he's going to come back and take her again."

The possibility that her daughter could be taken again is just one of the obstacles Luna must face, children's advocates said.

Laura was one of about 1,000 children abducted each year by noncustodial parents and taken to a foreign country, according to the U.S. State Department.

The San Antonio Express-News began investigating the plight of children taken abroad by noncustodial parents in November. The State Department reported then that Mexico is the top destination for parents who abduct their children. Since 1991, at least 750 children have been taken there.

A story about Luna and Laura that appeared in the May 11 edition of the San Antonio Express-News prompted Garcia to return Laura one day after Mother's Day.

By Wednesday, Mexico was hundreds of miles away from Laura, but not necessarily far from the thoughts of the little girl, who now speaks only Spanish.

She told her mother that she spent six months in Ciudad Victoria, Mexico, before moving to Rio Bravo, near Reynosa.

Though Laura told Luna she went to school, and won a top award in her math class, she also said her father pulled her out of school at times, fearing discovery.

While expressing little desire to go back to her father, Laura did speak of a life that she apparently enjoyed. She talked about visiting Parque Plaza Sesamo in Monterrey (a Sesame Street theme park).

And she told her mother that her father taught her how to ride a horse named "Tres d'Oro" at the house of a friend.

To Luna's surprise, Laura said her father took her to church on Sundays, where he taught her how to pray.

"Here, he never wanted to go to church," said Luna, who said she couldn't face church after Laura's abduction, despite her family's strong religious beliefs.

Once, Laura said, law enforcement officials came to Garcia's Rio Bravo apartment while he and Laura were out, and a relative kept them at bay. She and her father didn't go home that day.

"When we drove down the street and saw they were there, we didn't stop," she said.

Garcia's parents and relatives, some of whom reside in Austin, visited him frequently, Laura said.

Though Luna detected no signs of physical abuse, Laura indicated she was struck by her father's girlfriend, a woman with four children of her own who lived in a different Rio Bravo apartment. She was Laura's baby-sitter.

Checking for signs of physical abuse and sickness should be the first action a parent takes when an abducted child is returned, said Georgia Hilgeman, director of the Vanished Children's Alliance in San Jose, Calif., an advocacy organization for parents of internationally **abducted children**.

Hilgeman has had her own experience with an abducted child: Her 1-year-old daughter disappeared while with her ex-husband in 1976. The girl was found with her ex-husband's cousin in Puebla, Mexico, four years later.

Since then, Hilgeman, who was an elementary school counselor, has devoted her time to counseling families broken apart by international child abduction.

"I've been involved with this issue so long and seen so many of these kids grow up, and it tends not to be a happily-ever-after situation," she said.

Hilgeman recommended that Luna seek the help of a therapist, not just for Laura, but for her 5-year-old brother, Joel Garcia Jr., who was equally devastated by her abduction.

Laura, then 5, was taken by her father from the house of Luna's mother while Joel, 3, was present.

Garcia told Luna he didn't take the boy because he knew the tot would cry. Luna said one of the reasons she left Garcia was his jealousy, which became physically abusive, over the attention she paid Joel Jr.

Garcia "wanted to be out with his dad and friends, drinking," Luna said.

Hilgeman cautioned that Joel Jr. may suffer from trauma: "I see a red flag for that little boy."

Children's advocates said Luna must determine what Laura has been led to believe by her father.

"Typically, the parent who does the kidnapping has begun the process of parental alienation - saying things like, your mother's dead, or she doesn't want you," said Diana Buffington, Texas coordinator for the Children's Rights Council, a Washington-based advocacy group.

Indeed, Luna said Laura rushed into the house Monday after they were reunited, skeptical of news reports that Luna's walls were covered with the girl's pictures.

"(Garcia's) thing to (Laura) was I didn't want her around," Luna said in an interview before Laura was returned.

As for what Laura believes remains to be seen. She is quiet and observant. She has sudden bursts of joy, especially as she recognizes something from her former life.

But she is typically reserved, wary of strangers, and in a foreign country now where she doesn't speak the language. Luna, who speaks Spanish, helps her out.

On Wednesday, Laura and her mother dug through a closet full of three-year-old memories in the Luna household.

Laura punctuated her recognition of three bright pink mochilas (backpacks) with quick smiles.

"She loved her backpacks," Luna said, as Laura pulled scribbled baby books and crumpled childhood drawings from the bags.

Some Laura cast aside with hardly a glance; others she gazed at with the slightly nostalgic curiosity of someone older.

Maternal caresses were frequent, and Laura seemed to be hesitantly growing back into her old life. She made a point of showing her mother a heart she had drawn with family members' names enclosed.

Asked by her mother whether she preferred staying in Ciudad Victoria or here, she said softly, <I>Aqui contigo </I>(Here, with you).

Buffington said it will take time for mother and daughter to re-establish a bond.

"There's going to have to be a trust factor the parent is going to have to try to create," Buffington said.

"The longer they were separated, the more difficult it is to rebuild that bond."

Any kind of involvement on the part of the father at this point may be a hindrance to that process, children's advocates said.

"I think it may be really confusing right away to be visiting the dad," Hilgeman said. "And can you imagine the son, who lost his sister, who's spent years thinking, 'Why didn't Dad take me?' And now this man wants to see him."

The problem is complicated by the fact that Garcia faces arrest on a warrant charging him with interference with child custody-kidnapping. Garcia made his release of Laura contingent on Luna dropping charges against him, which she agreed to do. But state law enforcement officials won't allow it.

"He's violated a legal court order, and the warrant is still standing," said Hays County Sheriff's Detective Jeri Skrocki. "Even though the child's been returned, he violated a court order, and the state is pressing charges."

Garcia is presumed to be in the Austin area, but he did not respond to a request for an interview.

He has talked to Luna by telephone, she said, and would like to see Laura and Joel Jr.

Luna said she may agree to let the children meet with him, "... but if he gets caught, there's nothing I can do," she said.

Meanwhile, she has alarms on her house to prevent her children from being re-abducted. As soon as she gets the money, she plans to put a fence around her property, she said. She and all the children pile on to the king-size bed in her bedroom each night.

Luna has alerted schoolteachers to be wary of strangers.

John Trout, a Miami resident whose 5-year-old daughter, Vivian Trout, has been abducted twice by his former wife, Cuban citizen Marina Lopez, said Luna is taking the right steps.

He recommended she get a block on Laura's passport and think about relocating, possibly with another identity. Trout said Luna may have warm feelings for her former boyfriend now, but when she hears Laura's full story, that may change.

"I still have feelings for my 'ex' deep in my heart, I guess, but I'm not going to let her get in the way of my daughter and I," he said. "I've had to do everything I could to protect her from her mother."

Trout's daughter, believed now to be in Costa Rica, was re-abducted in 1997 during a supervised visitation by her mother, who locked the social worker overseeing the session in a room.

Trout said he would hate to see the same thing happen to Luna.

But Luna said she feels torn. On the one hand, Garcia has done wrong and hurt her.

On the other, Laura has told her she wants to continue seeing him.

"I want to visit my dad and stay here, and go back and forth," Laura said, enfolded in her mother's arms with a coloring book in her lap.

Asked how she plans to honor that request, Luna shrugged her shoulders and held Laura closer: "I don't know."

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Caption: Above: Laura Garcia, 8, sleeps beside her brother, 5-year-old Joel Garcia, in her family's Buda home. Left: Laura is embraced by her mother, Norma Luna, at the family's Buda home last week.

Norma Luna prays Wednesday with her children, Laura, 8, and Joel Garcia, 5, alongside her friend, Eloy Baeza, who holds their daughter, Breanna, at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Kyle. Laura was abducted and taken into Mexico by her father three years ago, and was returned to her mother Monday.

Above: Laura Garcia, 8, sleeps beside her brother, 5-year-old Joel Garcia, in her family's Buda home. Left: Laura embraced by her mother, Norma Luna, at the family's Buda home last week. Laura Garcia, 8, looks through a family photo album last week with her mother, Norma Luna, at the family's Buda home. Luna worries that Laura could be taken from her again.