



Unity-based agency helps to reunite kidnapped girl, father

By **Bob Stiles**
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The six-member rescue team spotted the kidnapped California girl outside a home in Mexico.

Leahlani Salinas, 6, was walking with another girl in Queretaro, about 125 miles northwest of Mexico City.



The team approached her quickly, led by her father, John Salinas -- the parent with court-ordered custodial rights.

She is safe now, back in the United States, through the efforts of the American Association for Lost Children Inc., a Unity-based group that rescues children.

"It was awesome," said Mark Miller, a team member and group founder, who recounted the rescue. "She's excited and happy to be home."



The rescue ended a 16-month search for the child, whose Bolivian mother abducted her, Miller said. A warrant was issued for her mother's arrest through Van Nuys police, he said.

American Association for Lost Children, a nonprofit group founded in 1987, has successfully found or recovered more than 165 missing children through the United States, Germany, Lebanon, South Korea and Mexico, according to Executive Director Patricia L. Moore.

Leahlani was leery at first when her father approached her but she warmed up quickly, Miller said.

The rescue mission began in March, when Leahlani's father learned of his daughter's possible whereabouts through a friend.

"He had an idea of possibly where the child might be in Mexico," Miller said.

He and others began the process of verifying that Leahlani was abducted. They needed various documents to enter Mexico and ensure their return.

"It takes a while to plan a rescue," Miller said.

The team, consisting of Miller; Donald W. Love, a private investigator; Amber Ibarra, a mother whose daughter was rescued; Wesley Johnson, a volunteer who posed as a priest on the trip to Mexico; Chad Hembree, an independent film producer; and the father went into Mexico last week.

They kept a watch outside three places where they believed the child might be.

"We had addresses to check out ... and once we saw the child outside of a home, after a day and a half of surveillance ... we took the child," Miller said.

She was spotted about 4:30 p.m. Friday.



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Leahlani and the team crossed back into this country about 1 a.m. Sunday at the border at Brownsville, Texas.

This time, the group faced no opposition. That's not always the case.

Often in countries such as Mexico, a rescue team must confront drug lords, gangs and even authorities who oppose their efforts, Miller said.

Johnson said his priest's black clothing made the trip easier.

"It helped out a lot because we got respect going through airports and other areas," he said.

It was nice to see that even gang members have reverence for the clergy, said Johnson of Latrobe.

"I found out I had to watch my language a little bit," Johnson joked.

Miller learned about Leahlani's predicament through a friend.

"Believe it or not, a friend of mine on Facebook contacted me in March and said, 'Hey, this man has a missing child,'" Miller said.

Leahlani did not go to school in Mexico to keep her whereabouts unannounced, Miller said.

Her outlook already has changed.

"She dancing and can't wait to go back to school," Miller said.

American Association For Lost Children, Inc.

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