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Reunited

Idaho Falls man finds missing son

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Post Register

If you turn on CBS's "48 Hours" tonight, you will see what appears to be a young boy being kidnapped. The scene is for real, but the circumstances are exactly the opposite of what you might think.

With a film crew on hand, Thomas Kloack of Idaho Falls this summer was reunited with his son, Robert, after five years of not knowing where the boy was.

Kloack and his family are featured in the show's season premiere, which focuses on kidnappings in custody disputes and how they tear the lives of families apart.

Kloack fought several years for custody of Robert, now 9, only to come up empty-handed, even after a Florida judge ruled in his favor. In 1987, after losing the court battle, his ex-wife, Penny, went underground

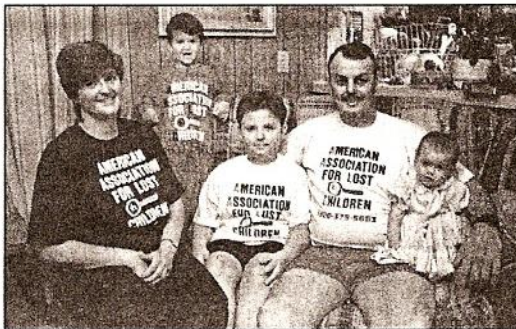
'48 Hours' will be aired tonight at 8 p.m. on KIDK-TV 3.

with the child, then 4.

"I couldn't find him," Kloack said. "I did everything I could do with all the resources I had at the time, but I always ran into a dead end."

One of his biggest obstacles was a resource he felt he should have been able to count on: the Florida court ruling in his favor. His wife, Candace, says she has a file two inches thick with letters to the state of Florida. When Robert was finally found by

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Scott Caraway/Post Register

The Kloack family is complete with the return of nine-year-old Robert, center, who was abducted by his biological mother. From left are stepmother Candace, Bradley, Robert, father Thomas and Amanda. The story of Robert's abduction will be featured tonight on "48 Hours."

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what CBS calls "amateur sleuths," the Kloacks discovered that Florida had neglected to issue the federal warrant for Penny Kloack, even though there had been authorization.

During the five years Robert was missing, Candace Kloack says she never gave up the search, even though her husband didn't talk about it much.

"You know men — they try to hold things back," she said. "But you can see when you love someone what hurts them. That's why I tried so hard."

Kloack says she contacted every organization she knew about that finds missing children. But it was only this summer that she had any luck. After seeing a sign advertising the American Association of Lost Children at Happy's Restaurant in Idaho Falls, she gave the group a call without telling her husband.

"I thought, 'What the heck, I've called everyone else,'" she said.

The AALC, which runs strictly on donations, asked her for details like the mother's Social Security number and the names and birthdates of Robert's mother's family, things she hadn't been asked for before. The staff gave her a list of things she needed to do.

Four days later, the AALC called back to tell her the birthdate she had given them for Robert's mother was wrong and that Robert's grandmother had remarried.

On July 15 she got another call: Robert had been found. She was told CBS wanted to tell the Kloacks' story as part of a show about kidnapping.

"At that point, I would have given (the AALC) the world if I had it," she said.

AALC staffers flew to Winterhaven, Fla., to verify Robert's identity. Meanwhile, a CBS crew arrived at the Kloack home and filmed the Kloacks getting the call

saying the child was indeed Robert.

They took the next plane to Florida. The next day, police arrested Penny Kloack and the Kloacks went into the home. The frightened boy kept saying, "You're not my dad." Thomas Kloack picked up his son and carried him out to the car.

"He was crying and scared, I was crying, and Tom was crying," Candace Kloack said.

During the last two months, Robert has been adjusting to his new life and family. He has a 3-year-old brother and a 1-year-old sister. The Kloacks have discovered that he is afraid of mountains and the dark, and that he never went to school. In fact, he rarely went outside to play.

"He's 9 years old and he didn't know where milk came from," she said.

Robert was taught enough by his mother to be placed in the fourth grade at Tebreaker Elementary. Candace Kloack, a teacher's aide, tutors him.

"He's not used to doing homework or getting assignments done," she said. "He hasn't learned the normal things you learn as you go up the ladder."

Shortly after the Kloacks returned to Idaho with Robert, Penny Kloack sued for custody and lost.

The Kloacks plan to get counseling for Robert to help him adjust to all the changes in his life, but first they say they need to recover from the financial strain of finding him. Kloack, an electrician with Wheeler Electric and a member of IBEW Local 449, says the AALC services were free. But flying to Florida twice was expensive.

The long ordeal has left Thomas Kloack unhappy with a legal system he says favors only those who have money to make it work.

"The state of Florida didn't do a thing. They just put me in a file, and said, 'There is nothing we can do,'" he said. "If it wasn't for the AALC, there is no way we would have found him."