

HEROES

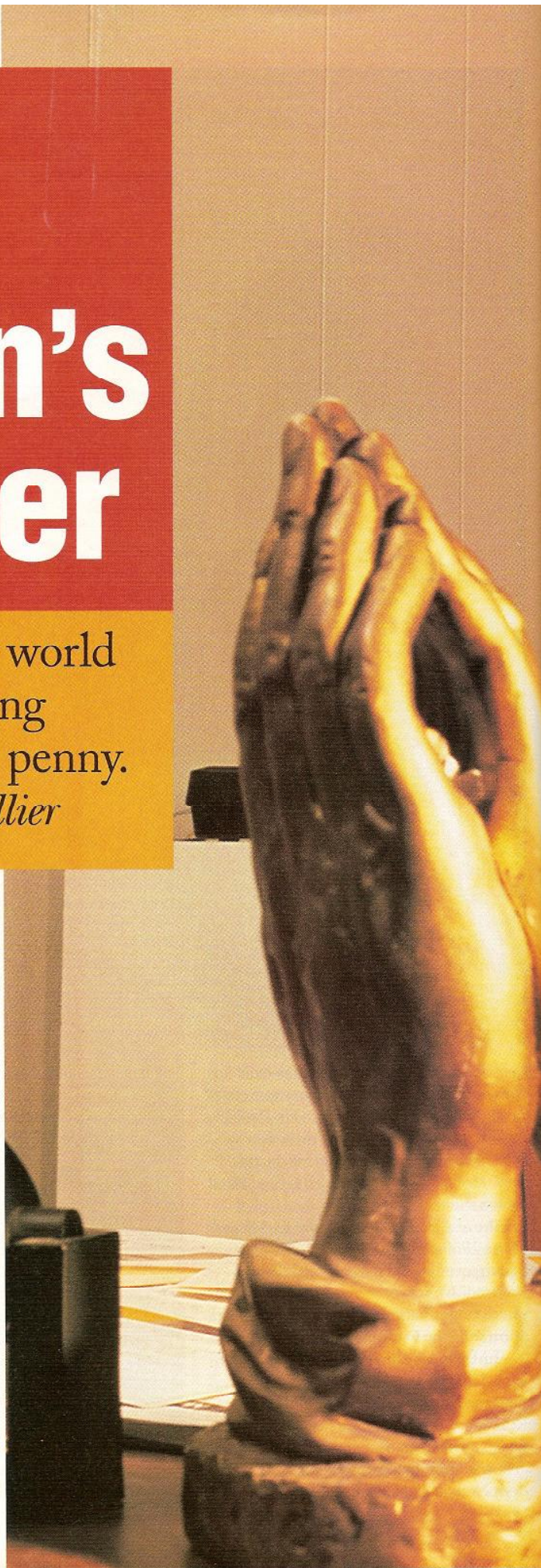
The Children's Crusader

Mark Miller travels the world to track down missing kids and never charges a penny.
By Ellen Mansoor Collier

When four-year-old Emily Gatewood saw her mother for the first time in 18 months—after she and her sister, Anna, age two, were abducted by their father during a nasty custody battle—she exclaimed, “What took you so long?”

Jackie Gatewood, an English teacher, spent almost two years and thousands of dollars searching for her daughters after her allegedly abusive ex-husband kidnapped them from their Arlington, Texas, home—and she had no help from local police or hired P.I.s. Desperate, she contacted Mark Miller, founder of the American Association for Lost Children (AALC), who offered to find Emily and Anna at no cost.

“Mark Miller flew to Dallas the next day and said, ‘Let’s go,’” recounts Jackie. “I was stunned. He’s the only person who would actually get in the car and help me look for my children.”



Miller, now 39, was true to his word: In ten days, a paper trail of clues led to a Texarkana trailer home where he found the father and daughters "living in a pigsty." It took 15 Texas and Arkansas police to circle the shoddy mobile-home park and arrest Donovan Gatewood, suspected of sexually abusing Emily and Anna; the girls watched as their father was taken away in handcuffs. Sadly, not only were the unkempt sisters—eating bacon on the floor and dressed only in training pants—covered with bruises and cigarette burns, but police also found films of the girls in "suggestive" poses.

"I was so happy to be with my mom again," recalls Emily Gatewood, now 11. "I love my mom very much." Today the nightmares have finally ended and the daughters—who'd been dressed like boys and called Tony and Dana by their dad—are "healthy and well adjusted," says Jackie. "Now I cherish every moment I spend with my daughters. Mark Miller saved their lives."

Such bittersweet family reunions are the best reward for Mark Miller, who combs the corners of the earth in search of children kidnapped by noncustodial parents—without charging a dime. He's rescued more than 100 children since founding the AALC in June 1987 with a little savings and a big dream.

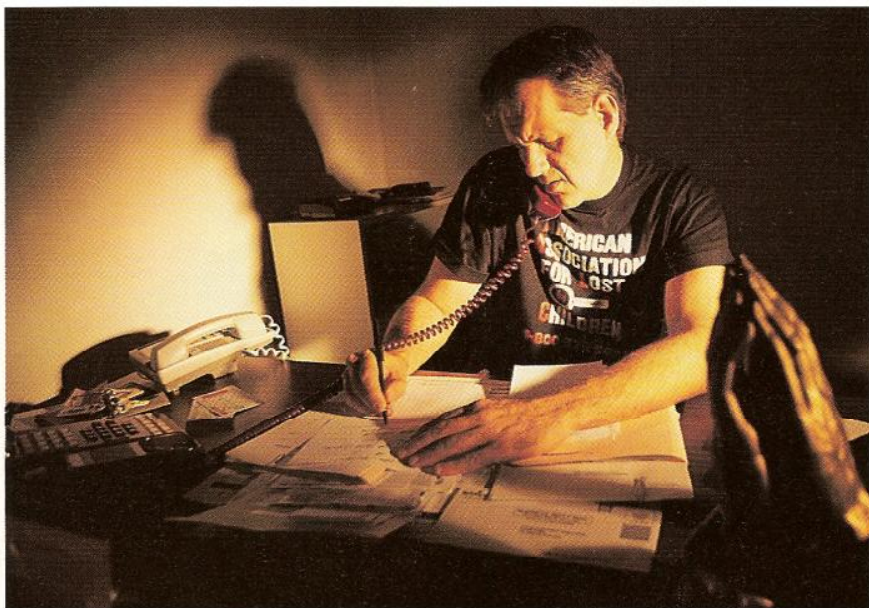
With a mixture of guts, grit, and good old-fashioned detective work—plus plenty of prayers and persistence—Miller has solved dozens of complex cases that have eluded the most seasoned P.I. or police force.

"The police have so many crimes and murders to handle, they don't consider child custody cases a high priority," he says. "Unlike other missing-children groups, which are only resource centers, the AALC performs 'hands on' investigations, including surveillance and phone interviews."

Working "hands on" has meant being threatened and attacked by irate parents as well as police, but—at 6' 5" and 210 pounds—the ex-college football player isn't easily intimidated. "I'm no Hercules," he insists. "I'm more of a peace-maker, not a fighter."

So what's his secret? "It sounds simple, but I physically go out and search for the children," he explains. "A lot of agencies or P.I.s will take your money—up to \$1,500 a day—but don't take action. They may post fliers or place photos on milk cartons, but they never go out *looking* for children. Lost children deserve more than a photo on a milk carton."

Indeed, it was such a flier of a young girl—the kind you get in the mail with a child's face underneath the words, "Have you seen me?"—that yanked at Mark's heartstrings back in 1987. Curious, Miller asked the agency that sent the flier, "How many children have you found?" "They refused to answer," he recalls. "Nobody was actually helping these parents look for their missing children. I was amazed to learn that over 350,000 children are abducted by family members each year."



Long hours are a way of life for Miller, who has flown around the world—and even been jailed in Mexico—in his search for missing kids. (Opposite) Some of his "found" children with Miller and their families.

With so much demand, Miller hand-picks each case he takes on. He doesn't hesitate to turn down a case if he suspects abuse, physical or emotional, on the part of the custodial parent who wants to hire him. To qualify for his services, parents must complete and submit a detailed, 11-page questionnaire, copies of their divorce and custody decrees, and photos, then undergo extensive interviews. In most cases, there must be a felony warrant on file for the kidnapper. But compassion moves him in the end. "When I hear stories of abuse, I'm driven to help," he says.

Like a modern-day Sherlock Holmes, Miller maps out a game plan for each case, tracking clues and leads that have taken him from Florida to California, Hawaii, Germany, and Lebanon. A parent and Pat Moore, his current assistant, one of the four AALC staff members, usually accompany him on these searches and, on international trips, help with the native language and cultural differences.

Besides battling bureaucratic red tape, he's had to outwit authorities in Germany, dodge Customs agents in Lebanon, outrun undercover cops in Mexico, and stay 17 hours in a Mexican jail. In May, Miller spent 22 days in El Salvador trying to rescue Ruth Miranda's two daughters—but their U.S. documents didn't impress officials. "Not many people are willing to spend three weeks in a corrupt country and risk their lives to find your children," says Miranda. "If you cry, they suffer with you. I cried when we

couldn't bring my girls home, but I know we'll be together soon."

Sound like *Mission Impossible*? Not for Miller, who explains, "I have to oversee everything like a movie director. Sometimes I need to be the producer, director, and actor all at once—to make sure everything goes smoothly and safely."

Above all, his foremost concern is for a child's welfare and happiness, though he's the first to admit these joyous reunions can be painful and traumatic, too—especially for children like Robert Kloack who, after five years in hiding, had forgotten his father.

"When I see children crying and upset, I worry that maybe I did the wrong thing," he admits. "But I know they're scared and shocked because they've been brainwashed into believing their mom or dad abandoned them or is dead. That's not love—it's revenge."

AALC Safety Tips for Children at Risk

1. Teach your child his or her full name and how to use the telephone to call home. Make sure the child knows your home telephone number and area code. Practice making collect calls, and tell your child that you will always accept a collect call. He or she should be instructed to call home immediately if anything unusual happens or if anyone tells him or her that you are dead or do not love the child anymore.
2. Notify your child's school of custody arrangements and make sure to provide certified copies of the final custody decree. Tell school personnel about any threats made by the noncustodial parent to snatch the child. Ask to be alerted immediately if the noncustodial parent makes unscheduled visits to the school, and request the school not allow the child to leave school grounds with the noncustodial parent without your written consent.
3. Keep a current list of the addresses and phone numbers of all relatives and friends of the noncustodial parent. Also note his/her Social Security number, date of birth, driver's license number, auto license plate, year and model of car, and current employer.
4. Treat child support and visitation as separate issues. You should not try to "get even" by refusing visitations with the noncustodial parent.
5. Note the model and license plate of the automobile that drives away with your child on visitations with the noncustodial parent.
6. Keep on friendly terms with the noncustodial parent and ex-family members. Don't try to get revenge or retaliate. Most children abducted by a noncustodial parent aren't taken because this parent loves the child (although they do), but rather to "get even" with you. Usually some small issue has irritated him or her and this supposedly justifies the action.
7. Spot check the noncustodial parent's residence and place of employment two or three times a year.
8. Talk with and listen to your child. Open communication will help the child understand that you love him or her and that the current arrangements are not his or her fault. Keep an open ear to the things the child may say about the noncustodial parent, such as a planned move, job change, vacation, etc.

True, with Miller's take-charge, proactive approach, the Houston-based AALC may not resemble your average Christian charity, but Miller does "whatever it takes" to find lost children. He's willing to do all the needed paperwork and legwork to reclaim a child—even testify in court. Once a kidnapper is located, he helps authorities arrange the arrest.

Several dramatic rescues have been caught on tape by shows including *Inside Edition*, *Hard Copy*, and *A Current Affair*, but what the cameras don't capture is the aftermath: a child's feelings of pain, loss, and betrayal after a life on the run.

"Kidnapping is a form of child abuse," Miller stresses. "The children are the ones who really suffer."

There's a method to his magic, but he prefers not to divulge any tricks of the trade for fear of tipping off abductors. Still, he's been known to dig through garbage, pose as a salesman or pizza delivery man, and spend hours on stake-outs—to name but a few techniques.

Does he ever feel he's compromising his Christian values using covert tactics? "I may be evasive, but I never lie," he bristles. "I know I've got the law—and the Lord—on my side."

In contrast to volunteers who establish non-profit organizations due to personal tragedy, Miller has no children nor any prior history with kidnapping cases. So here's the million-dollar question: Why would a single, ambitious professional devote his entire life to rescuing other people's children?

"I wanted to help people," he says simply. "Children are so innocent and vulnerable, they need our protection." Cynics may sneer that he sounds too altruistic to be true, but maybe they'd change their minds if they met Miller in person. Wearing shorts and an AALC T-shirt (the standard office attire), he comes across like an all-American Boy Scout—the type of nice guy a gal wants to bring home to mother.

A Catholic turned born-again Christian, Miller freely quotes from the Bible, calling himself and his staff "servants of the Lord." He considers his mission "a real David and Goliath situation"—though with his imposing physique, he looks more like the Goliath.

Visitors can't miss Miller's yellow 1940s home-turned-office, located off a busy beltway in west Houston, with its large, free-standing sign outside proclaiming: JESUS USED US TO FIND A LOST GIRL IN ARKANSAS. HALLELUJAH! Inside his small, plain office, plaques and photographs of reunited families adorn the walls, along with framed Bible verses. Fliers of 15 or so abducted children and their parents fill a big bulletin board, half marked FOUND.

His faith is what Miller claims gives him the courage to persevere, but the fact is, when he started the AALC in 1987, he hadn't yet "found Jesus." A terrifying nightmare of "demons in Hell" forced him to reexamine his middle-class priorities.

"I was going through the motions, but I felt a huge void in my life," he says now. "I didn't have peace in my heart."

A native of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, Miller grew up in a close-knit, blue-collar family, the son of a Hungarian homemaker and a German steel-mill worker. As the middle child between two older brothers and two younger sisters, he wanted to stand out from the crowd—"to be somebody." "My father always encouraged us to do something with our lives," he says. "He didn't want us to end up slaving our whole lives in the steel mills, and working odd jobs, like he did."

The first member of his family to graduate from college, Mark made his parents proud when he got a degree in business management from small St. Vincent College near Pittsburgh in 1981. A Texas couple convinced him to move to Houston during its oil-boom days in the early '80s, where he soon landed a job with a mobile-home company. In a matter of months, he became one of its top salespeople, pulling down \$80,000 in 1983. But sales plummeted when the oil bust hit, so in 1984 Miller got his stockbroker's license, and worked as an independent broker.

The next year, he bought a mom-and-pop convenience store in Conroe, north of Houston, but the steep payment took its toll. He sold the store in 1986, and continued trading stocks part-time.

(Continued on page 125)

(Miller from page 74)

During some soul-searching, Miller, at 28, pondered, "What should I do with my life?" He considered working for a large charity, but then picked up one of those throw-away fliers and an epiphany struck: "Maybe I can help find these missing children."

Armed with desire and determination—but lacking experience or a formal plan—Miller boldly embarked on his quixotic quest. First he invested his savings and sold off his stocks, applied for official non-profit status—and, in 1987, the AALC was born. To launch his new charity, he recruited a few volunteers and held car washes and bake sales—raising \$100 at a time.

Miller also started a cleaning business to make ends meet, but the charity consumed most of his time and energy. Before long, his car was repossessed, creditors canceled his cards, and the bank foreclosed on his home. Deeply in debt, he slept on the floor of his rented warehouse office and ate peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches for dinner. "I went from riches to rags in no time," he jokes.

The car washes brought in Miller's first cases (publicized by a poster he'd put up to encourage inquiries). He solved them with the help of Bob Gale, a missing-persons P.I. who works with him to this day. But overhead costs added up, so he decided to learn the trade firsthand. A quick study, he gained a savvy insider's knowledge (as well as a P.I.'s license) with Gale's firm.

"Mark is the most honest detective I've ever worked with," declares Gale, a former Vermont police chief and sheriff. "There are so many crooked P.I.s and agencies who take advantage of people, but he's never devious or deceitful. Police are among his biggest fans because he always works by the book and gets the job done."

Not long after Miller went back to Houston in January 1988, he rented a modest 1940s wood-frame house for \$375 a month. Here he both worked and lived—in the same office he uses, and now owns, today. That year he joined forces with a childhood friend, Mike Kramer, now AALC's executive director, and in time, the organization grew to support a paid full-time staff of four.

A case near his hometown attracted early media attention, and his reputation grew along with his commitment. Each triumph brought new cases and media fame, yet the budding charity claimed little in the way of financial well-being. To raise funds, the devoted do-gooders stood in front of Wal-Mart selling bags of

M&M's—up to 12 hours a day without a break—over \$55,000 worth in three years. "I didn't call my mother for months, because I knew she'd worry, 'Oh, no—my son, the college graduate, is begging for money?'" he admits.

Yet after three years of operating on hope and a shoestring budget, Miller knew praying for miracles wouldn't pay the bills. Tears cloud his eyes as he recalls the night he almost gave up on the floundering charity: After rescuing Emily and Anna Gatewood, he received a Rotary Club award in Dallas, but as he recalls: "I thought, Forget this award—we need funding! My heart was in it, but I was so tired of selling M&M's. When I told Jackie Gatewood that I was thinking of quitting, she started to cry, saying, 'You can't quit—no one's going to help parents find their missing children.'" Touched by the plight of AALC, the Rotary Club members awarded a thankful Miller \$1,300, later sending an additional check for \$500.

As an independent charity, the AALC had to rely on free air fare from Continental Airlines and donations from the World-Com long-distance service as well as contributions from grateful parents. Then, in a twist of fate, it was the charity's turn to be "saved" financially in 1992: A sympathetic distributor helped place candy vending machines publicizing the AALC and its hot line (800-375-5683) in stores nationwide.