

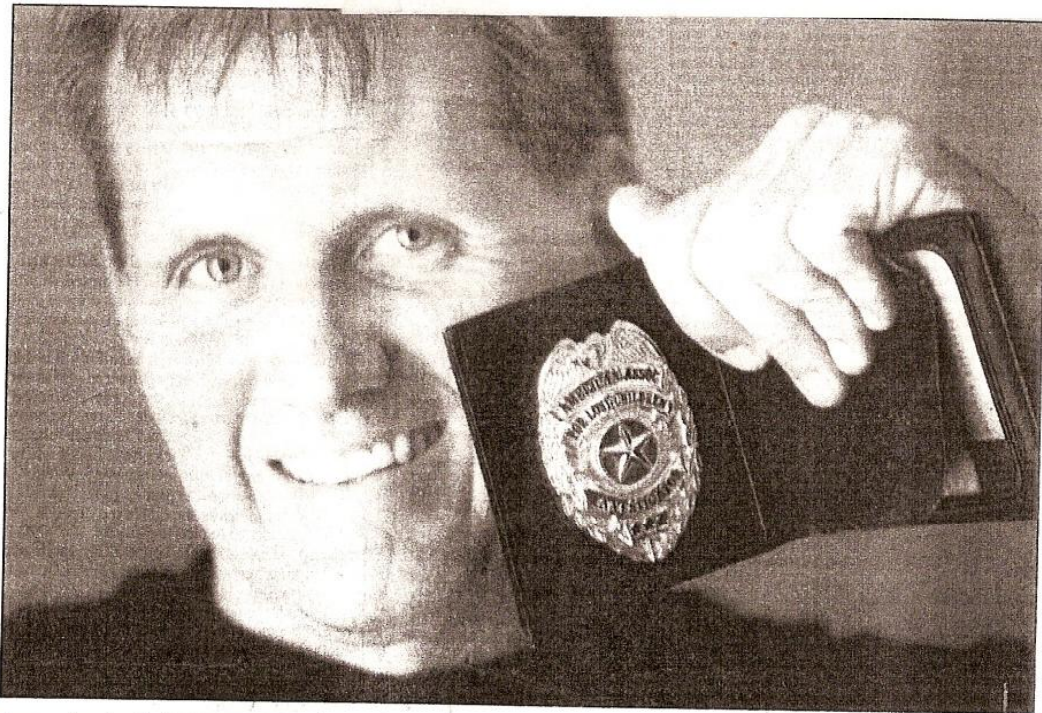
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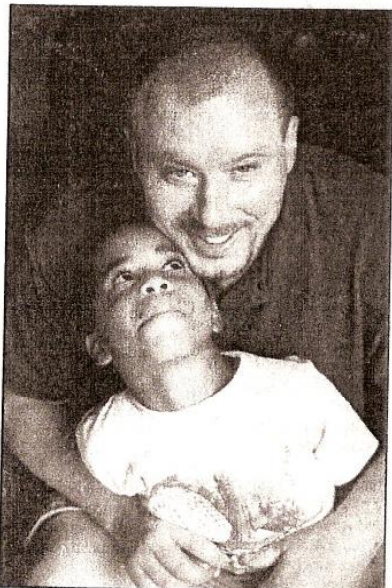
MONDAY, AUGUST 10, 1998

Tarrant County, Texas * "Where The West Begins"

50 CENTS



Amateur detective Mark Miller of Houston has recovered more than 100 children kidnapped in custody battles. His American Association for Lost Children is supported through donations and bubble-gum vending machines. Star-Telegram/CAROLYN BALMAN



Star-Telegram/FION T. ETIAMS
When Jeffrey Luke was 2, he was abducted by his mother, who did not have legal custody. Mark Miller reunited the Fort Worth boy with his father, Jeff.

Saving STOLEN CHILDREN

When a bitter parent abducts a child, Mark Miller will track them to the other side of the world — for free

By LARRY BINGHAM
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

HOUSTON — The detective picks up the ringing telephone. "Praise the Lord. May I help you?"

Every case Mark Miller investigates begins this way, with a single call. And after 11 years in the business of rescuing abducted kids, Miller gets a lot of calls.

He's the guy who can find children when police can't. He's the guy who will travel to Germany or Lebanon or Hawaii when police won't. He's the guy who will do it — and do it for free.

He's a sort of detective, an amateur sleuth with more than 100 happy endings in his files. Miller inserts himself into the ugliest of domes-

tic situations — custody battles — because he thinks somebody should. He thinks a child belongs at home, safe from a life on the run, safe from hiding and lies.

So nearly every day, his telephone rings.

When it rang in January 1996, Jeff Luke was on the other end, calling from Fort Worth. Jeff and his wife had divorced: He got custody of their 2-year-old son; she got weekend visitation. Harriet Brown picked up little Jeffrey on April 19, 1995 — but she never returned.

Miller is picky about the cases he takes, and he told Luke that over the telephone. Miller requires clients to fill out an 11-page questionnaire and provide a divorce decree, custody paperwork, family pictures, a felony warrant.

More on MILLER on Page 2

Miller

Continued from Page 1

He works closely with police, and they arrest the abductor after he finds the child.

While Miller studies the case, he sends a video for Luke to study him.

It opens with a chorus of tiny voices singing *Jesus Loves the Little Children*. Then Miller appears. He is over 6 feet tall, built like a basketball player, and he is in airports and parking lots, surrounded by television cameras, reuniting sobbing parents with overwhelmed kids.

There he is on *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition* and *A Current Affair*. There he is on *CNN Live With Larry King* and *48 Hours* and *Good Morning Houston*.

The videotape reveals why Miller has a can-do reputation. Here are his triumphs: Rescuing Ramzy and Nora in Lebanon, Sophia in Virginia, Robert in Florida, Eric in Texas; bringing Andre, Kimberly, Mark, Tony and Rachel back from Hawaii.

What the video doesn't explain is why Miller quit selling mobile homes and trading stocks. It doesn't explain why he quit paying his mortgage and car payment and slept on the couch in a rental house and ate peanut butter sandwiches to start his non-profit organization, the American Association for Lost Children Inc.

Why? "I wanted to help people," Miller says.

He was 29 years old, he says, when recurring dreams of demons led him to see his was an empty life. He put aside the Catholicism he grew up with as a boy outside Pittsburgh, and he embraced the faith of a nondenominational Bible church in Houston. He needed meaning. He found it finding kids.

Miller paid for his early efforts with bake sales, carwashes and a golf tournament. Most of his income was derived from selling M&M candies and lemonade at a Wal-Mart. Today, he pays a staff of four through donations and a string of bubble-gum vending machines in several states. He spends some on travel and spy gadgets, like two-way radios and bugging devices.

By 1996, when Jeff Luke called, Miller had honed his investigating skills. He started with tips from a retired private eye, he learned more on the job, and he sought inspiration in every case, asking, "Lord, what should we do next?"

Miller has picked through trash for utility bills and tattered checks. He has delivered pizzas and flowers to peek behind closed doors. He played lost in North Carolina, he pretended to buy property in Texas, and in one case, he and a partner followed a Florida grandparent to a telephone booth where she called a missing mother in Tennessee. While Miller created a distraction, his partner looked over the woman's shoulder as she dialed the number.

Miller learned to pass the time on stakeouts by reading his black leather-bound Bible and listening to Scripture tapes, the way he did in Arkansas, on the trail of little Jeffrey Luke.

When he took the case almost four years ago, the search began at an Irving apartment where the boy's mother lived with her sister. Two of Miller's employees, a 76-year-old woman and a woman in her 30s, knocked on apartment doors, pretending to distribute religious tracts. The guise worked, and they got inside. The boy was gone, and the sister was eliminated from the trail.

They traveled to Little Rock, where other relatives lived. After staking out brothers and sisters, the last resort was to go undercover.

The plan was for a 13-year-old girl, the daughter of one of Miller's workers, to pose as a new kid in the neighborhood. Miller watched from a rental car as the girl and her mother struck up a conversation at the bus stop with little Jeffrey's aunt and cousin.

The ruse worked, and the girl made friends with



Star-Telegram/For 'T. E. ...
Jeff Luke helps his 5-year-old son, Jeffrey, get ready for kindergarten. The father and son were separated for a year before the American Association for Lost Children helped locate the boy.

the cousin. The two stayed in touch by telephone after Miller returned to Houston. During one of those conversations, the girl in Arkansas mentioned a boy cousin who lived with a grandmother out in the country.

The tip led Miller to Holly Grove, population 180, to a house down a two-lane road, in an area surrounded by rice fields and marshes and not much else.

On April 26, 1996 — 370 days after Jeffrey didn't come home — Miller met Jeff Luke at the Little Rock airport. Miller had found the boy. But the case was not in the data base and there was no felony arrest warrant to give police.

They prayed at the airport. "Lord, let him be somewhere outside where he can pick him up."

When Miller and Luke reached the house, little Jeffrey was there, sitting on the bottom step, his little hands in his little lap, like he was waiting. The father grabbed his son as the mother stormed out the door. She swung a tree branch until the detective intervened. The grandmother threw stones as the car rolled down the drive.

"I would still be missing Jeffrey if it were not for Mark Miller and his people," Jeff Luke says. "I couldn't even begin to pay him back for what he's done. He has brought my son back to me."

This is how most cases end. This, Miller says, is why he puts up with the dangers, like the time he was detained in El Salvador, the time he was jailed in Mexico, the time his car was searched in Syria.

He started rescuing stolen kids because his "heart was churning." But as he sits in his office, surrounded by posters, some covered with the words "Bless God! Another Found!," Miller says his heart is churning again.

He has traveled to the Philippines for missionary work. He has mailed boxes of used clothes to poor families in Africa. He recently returned from China, where he smuggled matchbook-size Bibles to underground Christian churches.

He will be 40 in November, and his spiky hair is faintly gray. He is contemplating the future when the telephone rings, and the detective is back on a case.

"Praise the Lord!" Miller says. "Can I help you?"

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For more information

The American Association for Lost Children can be reached at (800) 375-5683.