

# I TOOK back my child

After their children were abducted, these gutsy moms fought the odds to bring them safely home

**L**osing a child to kidnapers is one of the greatest fears for a parent. Although most of us fret about strangers taking our child, in reality the majority of abductions are committed by a family member. Meet two mothers whose lives fell apart when their children were abducted. When the authorities hit a dead end, these women found a way—drawing upon volunteers, prayer and an inner strength they didn't know they had—to get their kids back.

*By Gayle Forman*

Amber, who didn't see her son, Dylan, for 14 months, says he sometimes stops playing to ask, "What took you so long to get me?"

## 'God helped me find my son when the government couldn't'

Amber Ibarra, 22, Dickson, Tenn.

Dylan, 4, was taken July 22, 2007, and found Sept. 11, 2008

Everything happened so fast, I felt like I was hit by an 18-wheeler. Irving and I were high school sweethearts who married too young. We had recently separated, and I thought we were on friendly terms. Dylan, our 2-year-old son, lived with me, and Irving took him after church on Sunday until Tuesday morning. But one Monday, Irving called and started cursing at me. I knew he was upset that our relationship was over, but he'd never used language like that before, and it scared me. I called Dylan's day care and found out Dylan had not shown up that day.

Right away I contacted the police, but they told me that because we were still married, Irving could take Dylan anywhere he wanted and he wouldn't be breaking any laws. The next morning, I went to the town court to get emergency custody, but it was too late—

Irving and Dylan were already gone.

Irving's whole family moved back to Mexico within two weeks, so I had a good idea where Dylan was. I contacted the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation and the State Department, but after several months, all they could do for me was arrange a court date in Mexico for the next year. Following any lead, I opened every door to get Dylan back, but it felt like each one slammed in my face. I was left to fight for my son alone. And if Irving didn't show up, the hearing would just be postponed another year.

Irving took the most important thing in my life from me. As a hospice nurse, I know what dying looks like. I was only 20, but I was so depressed I felt my body shutting down. Physically I was a mess. I began stuttering. I didn't want to live.

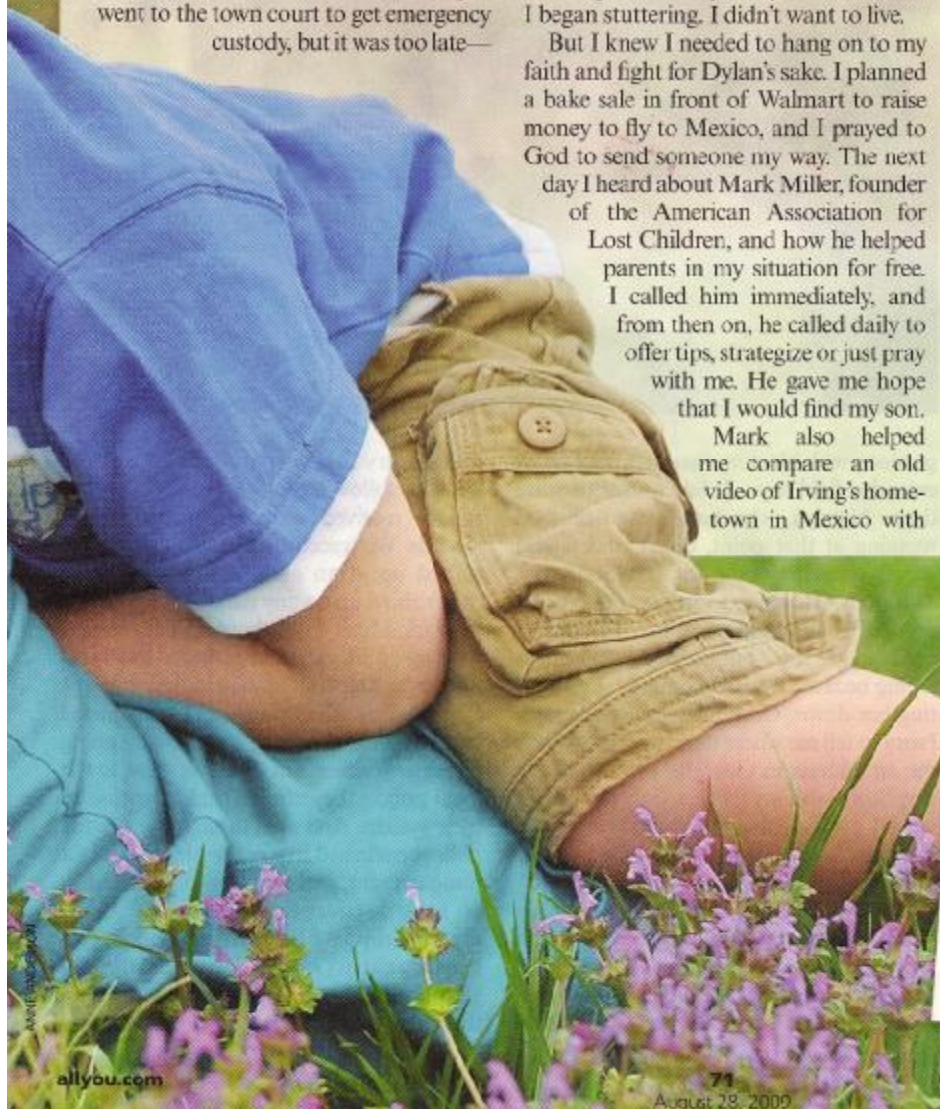
But I knew I needed to hang on to my faith and fight for Dylan's sake. I planned a bake sale in front of Walmart to raise money to fly to Mexico, and I prayed to God to send someone my way. The next day I heard about Mark Miller, founder of the American Association for Lost Children, and how he helped parents in my situation for free. I called him immediately, and from then on, he called daily to offer tips, strategize or just pray with me. He gave me hope that I would find my son.

Mark also helped me compare an old video of Irving's hometown in Mexico with

satellite images on Google Earth to pinpoint Irving's house. Mark and I then flew to Mexico and were miraculously seated on the plane next to a Mexican government official. When he heard my story, he put us in touch with the police in Irving's town. They didn't have to abide by my American custody papers, but they chose to. They told Irving's family, "We know he's here, so either bring him tomorrow or everyone goes to prison for 20 years."

My heart skipped 10 beats when the car finally pulled up with Dylan inside. Would he remember me? Would he want to stay with his daddy? I rushed into the office, and there he was. I held him and started crying. "Do you know who I am?" I asked. "Yeah, you're my mommy," he replied. "What took you so long?" Then he started to cry.

On the drive back over the border, Irving called to apologize. I didn't know what to say. He knows he made a mistake, and he still calls to say so every day. Dylan didn't want to talk to him at first, but he misses his daddy, and I've forgiven him. We're even planning a supervised visit to Mexico. The police know we're coming. I might not trust Irving, but I have complete trust in God.





## 'I have my babies back, but I worry about their emotional scars'

**Nicole Gantt, 26, Albany, N.Y. Ivory Jr., 6, and Natalya, 4, were taken July 23, 2008, and returned Sept. 23, 2008**

**O**n that July morning when I left Ivory Jr., who was 5, and Natalya, 3, at day care, Natalya was particularly upset and clingy. "No, Mommy, no! Don't leave me." I think she had a bad feeling.

When I got a call later, telling me their father had picked them up, I became anxious and started crying. Ivory, my ex, lived in Georgia, and he never just showed up without communicating. I called the police immediately, and the first thing they asked was if I had custody papers. No, I told them, but I was their primary guardian. Ivory hadn't seen his kids in months—he didn't even pay child support. As the police explained why he hadn't broken any laws, a piece of me was still expecting my kids to walk in the door and end my nightmare. But as the hours passed, the unbelievable fear in my mind became more real: He took my kids. They must be halfway to Georgia by now.

Before the next day was through, I had secured full custody and suspended Ivory's rights to the kids. I called his cell phone and told him he had to bring the kids back, but he just replied, "Talk to my lawyer." I was sobbing so hard I could barely speak. Ivory's father is a retired police captain. It occurred to me that if Ivory wanted to hide my kids, I might never find them.

During the next month it slowly dawned on me that neither the FBI nor the police were going to get my kids back. Ivory did let them talk to me a few times, but I had to



Nicole wants to ensure that Natalya and Ivory Jr. are secure in their home and know that she loves them.

go along with his story that they were on an extended field trip—I didn't want to scare them. Natalya, who hadn't even finished weaning at that point, didn't understand why I wouldn't come for her. She'd cry, "Mommy, Mommy, I want you to pick us up now." I would reassure her, "Mommy's going to get you," but later I'd break down crying because I wasn't coming—I was letting her down. Once after my son begged Ivory to tell me where they were, Ivory gave me an address in Georgia. I drove all the way down with my mother, only to find out when I got there that they hadn't been there in weeks. Ivory stopped letting the kids call after that.

I was at my wit's end. Then my cousin heard a news report about the American Association for Lost Children. The AAFLC helped us get organized, making sure Ivory's criminal case showed up all over

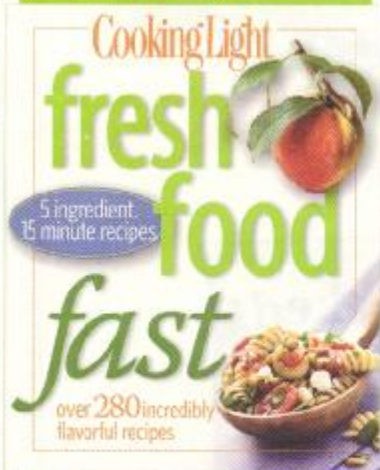
the country and preparing us so we'd be ready to follow any clues. Finally, the kids' school received a call requesting their records. We traced the fax number, and it turned up at an address in Florida that didn't show up on any map.

Mark Miller from the AAFLC traveled with me to Florida and gathered local volunteers to help us find the remote property. I remember the moment I recognized Ivory's truck, thinking, I'm actually going to see my babies! But when we went to the local police, they couldn't find the case in their system. And even though the Albany police confirmed it over the phone, it was a Sunday night, and we were told we had to go back to court the following day. I felt my kids slipping through my fingers, just like they did in Georgia. We waited the longest nine hours of my life on Monday until the judge finally issued an order allowing

SCOTT JONES

# Cooking Light

You're just  
5 ingredients  
& 15 minutes  
away from  
a fresh,  
healthy meal



Brought to you by  
**Oxmoor House**

Available  
wherever  
books  
are sold.

[www.oxmoorhouse.com](http://www.oxmoorhouse.com)

## It happened to me



the police to take the kids by any means necessary. At 9 that night, six cops with their guns drawn surrounded the house. Since there was no warrant for Ivory in

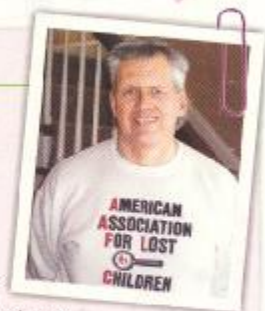
Florida, he wasn't arrested. But I was reunited with my kids in the back of a squad car an hour later. Ivory Jr. was smiling ear to ear, but Natalya kept hitting me before she realized who I was. Then she just wanted me to hold her tight. I couldn't stop crying. It was like giving birth all over again.

I understand that Ivory wants to be in their lives, but I don't trust him to be alone with the kids again. We had an order of protection, but Ivory finally got supervised visitation. Ivory Jr. sees those months down South as an adventure, and he wants his dad to visit. Natalya is more traumatized. She's still scared to be away from me at all, and she cries and hits a lot now. A psychologist said she's angry and thinks maybe her mommy didn't love her during that time. I want to make sure neither of my kids ever questions my love again.

### HELPING TO REUNITE FAMILIES

**MARK R. MILLER**, FOUNDER OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR LOST CHILDREN (800-375-5683, AAFLC.ORG)

Miller was instrumental in helping Amber and Nicole recover their children. He warns that establishing custody is essential, but it doesn't always stop an ex from kidnapping a child. "In most of the cases I've worked on, the abductor takes the child out of spite during visitation rights," says Miller, whose nonprofit—which operates on donations and doesn't charge parents—has reunited more than 160 abducted children with their families. He recommends these safeguards as well as immediate action in the event of an abduction.



#### → Plan ahead

If you think your child's father is capable of abduction, follow these guidelines.

- 1 Keep your ears and eyes open. Write down the make, model and license plate of your ex's car, and note any new names you hear your kids mention. The children might be a valuable source of information.
- 2 Retain your in-laws' contact information. Stay on good terms with them in case you ever need their help.
- 3 Hold on to important documents. If your ex is a foreign national, keep your child's passport and birth certificate. That won't necessarily prevent your ex from taking your child out of the country, but it does make it more difficult.
- 4 Tread lightly. Most abductions happen out of spite. Maintain a civil atmosphere to minimize animosity.

#### → If the unthinkable happens Act quickly and cover your bases.

- 1 Call the police as soon as you suspect anything.
- 2 File a missing-child report.
- 3 If you think your child is being taken out of the country, contact the U.S. State Department immediately. Visit [travel.state.gov/family/abduction/resources/resources\\_550.html](http://travel.state.gov/family/abduction/resources/resources_550.html).
- 4 If you don't already have custody of your children, file for emergency custody at your local family court.
- 5 If you're close with your ex's family, reach out. But realize that they might side with your ex.
- 6 If you have no luck with the authorities or if your child has been taken out of the country, contact the American Association for Lost Children ([aaflc.org](http://aaflc.org)).