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Reclaiming her children

Broward mom goes to Lebanon to get son, daughter

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In a dramatic and daring rescue that involved traveling halfway around the world, a South Florida woman snatched her two children away from their father, who took them overseas three years ago after a bitter custody dispute.

Nabela Henry arrived Tuesday night at Miami International Airport, holding hands with her son, Ramzy, 7, and daughter, Nora, 5. Henry grabbed her children on their way to school Monday in Tripoli, Lebanon.

"This is a dream come true, and I still can't believe it," Henry said.

Nora was 2½ when she last saw her mother. Her father, Saad Fouad Abdo, had taken the children for the weekend and never returned.

Henry spoke to her children occasionally during the absence, whenever the father "needed something" like divorce documents. Through faxes and phone numbers, Henry, who is remarried, found out that her ex-husband was in Romania, but he

later moved to Lebanon.

At first she tried official channels.

"There's no help, and nobody to talk to," said Henry, 26, from North Lauderdale. "The State Department doesn't help you."

Then, in her desperation to find her children, she paid \$12,000 to a private investigator.

That money, she said, is "gone."

Somehow, she connected with Maria Nicholas, who successfully rescued her daughter Anna Marie when her father kidnapped her to Germany. Nicholas went through a Houston-based, nonprofit agency called the American Association for Lost Children.

Mark Miller, the small agency's founder, and Pat Moore, an investigator with the agency, accompanied Henry to Tripoli, Lebanon.

They staked out Abdo's house first. When no one appeared, they went looking for the children's school.

All they knew was that the children attended an American private school there. After asking around in the unfamiliar city, they were told about a school.

Henry, Miller and Moore took a taxi to the school early in the morning. Moore and Henry walked into the school and asked a little girl on the playground about Ramzy.

Then they waited outside. They saw Ramzy first. Henry picked him up and told him she was his mother. She said he recognized her.

Nora's bus was late. So they waited. When she arrived, Henry picked her up, too.

"Nora kept hugging me and kissing me," Henry said.

Henry said she assumes that the father knows she kidnapped her children because she told the teachers she was their mother.

The journey home was arduous. Their route:

Tripoli to Beirut to Cyprus to Vienna to Paris to New York City to Miami.

Were they worried about being followed? Miller said no, adding simply, "That was the way home."

Moore said it was the longest trip that investigators from the 9-year-old agency ever made. She said their agency has helped recover more than 90 children.

Henry's bill from the agency: zero. The agency doesn't charge parents, relying on donations. The cost of this trip, Henry said, exceeded \$10,000.

Neither Moore nor Miller has a private investigator's license.

"You don't need one," Miller said. "There are no courtrooms that govern the outside of the country."

FBI spokeswoman Lucie Vonderhaar said Henry's situation is rather complex.

"Obviously, she was married here in the States, so in her estimation, she is following our law," Vonderhaar said. "And if she has custody then in the U.S., that mandate is ordered and her children are hers. But when you involve another country, their laws are different and vary from what we adhere to in the U.S."

Vonderhaar said that while cases like Henry's are not common, there have been others.

"The father from whatever country will take the children where he is legally protected under the laws of his country," Vonderhaar said.

If there is a treaty between the United States and that country, then that would mandate whether it's legal to take the children back, Vonderhaar said.

Vonderhaar, who was at home late Tuesday when reached for comment, did not know whether the United States has an agreement with Lebanon.

Despite being home, Henry said she will always be looking over her shoulder.

"There's no guarantee he won't try to take the kids again," she said.



HOME AGAIN: Nabela Henry, center, arrives at Miami International Airport on Tuesday night, holding hands with her son Ramzy, 7, left, and daughter Nora, 5, right.

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