

# THE MONITOR

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## FAMILY

### After stormy search, Rio Grande City mother, children reunited for holidays

By CINDY LONG  
The Monitor

**PHARR** — In the dark of a recent night, Irene Alvarez stood quietly, watching police cars and a corner of a trailer home that held the two children she had not seen for nearly six months.

Alvarez had been locked in a bitter custody battle with her ex-husband when he disappeared with their children during a court-arranged visit. For months, she wondered if she would ever again see her 10-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son.

"When they told me he moved, I wasn't sure if they were going to be able to find them," said Alvarez, of

Rio Grande City.

A complicated private investigation located them, though, and ultimately led Alvarez to her uneasy waiting place outside the home she knew contained her children.

As the clock ticked away seconds into minutes, then into an hour, chirping crickets and the hum of an idling car engine were the only sounds — until Pharr police officers escorted Alvarez and her father, Gilbert Alvarez, to the front of the trailer home.

"These kids, they are going to need a lot of love," Pharr police Sgt. Noel Luna told Alvarez before the children came out. "They are the victims here."

And he was right. The presence of

the police, as well as the confusion of not having seen their mother for several months, left the children confused and uncertain.

Alvarez's 11-year-old son, Lorenzo Pablo Samaniego, was the first to emerge from the house and, with tears flowing, moved directly into his mother's arms. They stood that way for long moments, as Alvarez whispered consoling words to her son.

A few minutes later, the little girl, Guillermina Lucia Anita Samaniego, stepped hesitantly out of the home, looking wary. Then she walked into her mother's waiting



Cindy Long/The Monitor

**Together Again:** Lorenzo Pablo Samaniego, center, is hugged by his grandfather, Gilbert Alvarez, left, as his mother, Irene Alvarez, wipes tears away from his face. Samaniego and his sister were reunited in October in Pharr with the help of the American Association for Lost Children Inc., a Houston-based non-profit organization.

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## Reunited

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embrace. Sobbing, they stood together a few moments more before a resident of the trailer home ordered them to leave the property.

The reunited family quickly left the trailer park and headed to the police station to complete some paperwork. It was a five-minute drive to the police station, but it was filled with questions about the future.

"What school am I going to go to?" Guillermina asked.

Alvarez stroked her daughter's hair.

"The same one you were (in)," she said, reassuring her.

About a month has passed since the reunion, and Alvarez said her family is getting back to normal. They have spent their time rebuilding trust, with quiet evenings together and a simple routine.

"We straightened things out," Alvarez said of misinformation the children received about her during their absence.

She said both children adjusted quickly to the daily routine of school and evenings with their

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— Irene Alvarez

mother.

"They eat a snack and then they do their homework," she said.

The evening also includes some television cartoons and an early bedtime.

"My little girl was in a program for the Veteran's Day," Alvarez said with obvious pride. "She danced and everything."

Thanksgiving was especially important this year, she said, because she realized just how much she had to be thankful for.

And that happiness is payment enough for Mark Miller, of the American Association for Lost Children Inc., who helped find the children for Alvarez.

One of Alvarez's neighbors saw a television program that men-

tioned the AALC and gave a toll-free number. She called, and less than two months later, Miller found the children in Pharr.

He founded the AALC in 1987, in Houston, after he saw a flyer on a missing little girl. Instead of tossing the flyer into the trash, he began to wonder what had happened to her, and ended up starting a Christian organization to help people find their missing children.

Over the past dozen years, Miller has helped reunite more than 100 children with their parents.

"At a certain point, I quit counting. I didn't want it to be a numbers game," he said.

AALC never charges for its services and subsists entirely on donations. He said his faith in God

and his desire to help missing children keep him going.

Miller's investigation led to the arrest of the children's father, Roberto Samaniego, on charges of interfering with child custody when he failed to return the children to their mother. Alvarez said her ex-husband is out on bail and demanding visitation. However, she has legal custody, she said, and plans to collect unpaid child support.

She said the most important thing is that she and the children are together again, and all are looking forward to celebrating Christmas and ringing in the new millennium.

"They told me they wanted a (Sony) Playstation for Christmas," Alvarez said. "I'm going to try to get them what they ask for, and I give thanks to the Lord because they are with me."

Parents with missing children can reach Mark Miller and the American Association for Lost Children by calling (800) 375-5683.