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Missing Texas kids tracked to Live Oak

Mother remains in jail; kids in foster home

By DONNA KIMURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A father is waiting to be reunited with two children he hasn't seen in more than a year, while the mother remains in jail on suspicion of stealing the children out of Texas.

The reunion between Patrick Mooney, 27, and his children was delayed Thursday as Santa Cruz County officials sorted through the matter.

The children were placed in a foster home Wednesday after sheriff's deputies arrested 24-year-old mother Gina Hurt in Live Oak for interfering with a custody order.

The custody battle has crossed two state lines and involved a highly publicized group that searches for abducted children.

Mooney, along with Mark Miller, founder of the non-profit American Association for Lost Children, met with county Child Protective Services officials to arrange a reunion.

"I got all kinds of copies of me getting custody of the children," Mooney said. "I'll show it to them then maybe they'll release the children."

Miller's group found Hurt and her children living in a quiet Live Oak neighborhood.

Texas officials say they will extradite her from Santa Cruz if she refuses to return voluntarily to Potter County to face a felony charge of interfering with a child custody order.

She is accused of taking Jake Mooney, 5, and Brittney Mooney, 4, from Mooney.

Texas courts awarded custody of the children to their father, and Mooney said that Hurt had never used the visitation rights the court had granted her.

He had hoped to see them on Thursday, but said the reunion was delayed because officials were still sorting through the matter.

"I've been in Santa Cruz for two days," he said. "I'm ready to go. I'm ready to take my children to my family."

Mooney said the first thing he will tell his children is "I love you."

Potter County District Attorney Danny Hill said Texas officials will take Hurt back to Texas to try her on the felony charge.

Hill said a warrant was issued for Hurt in September 1990.

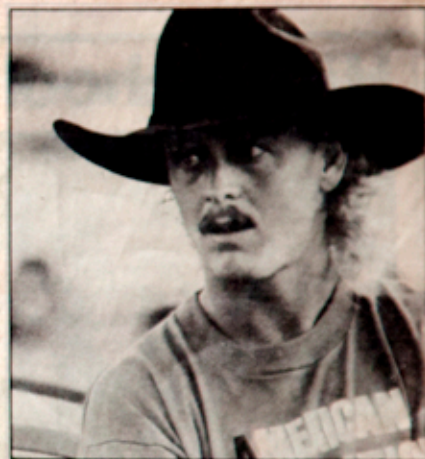


Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Mark Miller was a stockbroker until a religious conversion changed his life.

'I've been in Santa Cruz for two days. I'm ready to go. I'm ready to take my children to my family.'

— Patrick Mooney



Child tracker 'wanted to help others'

By DONNA KIMURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Mark Miller has found abducted children in Detroit, Seattle, Bakersfield, and now Santa Cruz.

The Pennsylvania native follows paper trails, makes phone calls, and travels the country to find a missing child.

Placing a picture of a little girl or boy on a poster or milk carton isn't enough for 32-year-old Miller.

"Somebody needs to look for these children," he said Thursday. "You keep getting fliers in the mail about them, but no one's looking for them."

In four years, Miller and his Houston-based American Association for Lost Children have found nearly 50 missing

'I just persevere. I just believe I'll get more leads.'

— Mark Miller,
child finder

children.

The 48th and 49th children found by Miller were discovered Wednesday afternoon living in Live Oak.

Jake Mooney, 5, and Brittney Mooney, 4, were living with their mother, Gina Hurt, who left Texas with the chil-

dren. The children's father, Patrick Mooney, was granted custody of the children, but Hurt took them from him more than a year ago, authorities said.

Miller followed leads that traced Hurt to an Oklahoma city and then to Santa Cruz.

"Rumor had it she went west," he said, wearing a shirt with the association's logo emblazoned on the front.

A born-again Christian, Miller said he founded the organization at a time when there was a void in his life.

"I was mostly doing stuff for myself," he said. "I wanted to help others."

When the search for a missing child becomes frustrating, he said he reads the Bible and keeps working.

"I just persevere. I just believe I'll get

more leads."

Other agencies serve as resource centers, distributing information about missing kids. But he said AALC is the only one that actively searches for kids.

Miller said he is not a maverick, working outside the system.

"We work within the law," he said. "We don't think we're rebels. We handle cases where there is a felony warrant. Basically, the courts and the district attorney have already looked into the case."

Miller works strictly on donations and charges the families nothing. Continental Airlines donates flights to Miller.

"Families go through enough trauma," he said. "The children suffer."

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