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Local mom finds calling with rescue missions

Ibarra helped rescue 7-year-old California girl

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Written by [Josh Arntz](#) | The Dickson Herald

Dickson County resident Amber Ibarra knows the pain and anguish a parent experiences when her child goes missing – she suffered mentally and physically when her own son disappeared for 14 months.

“If you don’t have an abducted child or never experienced it, it’s kind of hard for you to relate,” said Ibarra. “You can’t describe what it’s like not knowing where your kid’s at.”



The Dickson mother suffered from stress-related illnesses, migraines, blood in her bladder, and worked three jobs on top of her condition, trying to keep her mind off her missing son while raising the funds to find him.

“It takes a toll on you thinking about all of this stuff – the worst case scenario that could happen to your kid and you’re not there or anything,” she said. “It’s hard on a human body.”

Pictured are, from left, Chad Hembree, Amber Ibarra, Don Love, Mark Miller, John Salinas and Wesley Johnson, with Leahlani. Photo taken June 25 in Mexico City. / Submitted photo

“When Dylan was missing I remember my body was shutting down,” she added. Ibarra recovered her son, Dylan from his father’s non-custodial

guardianship Sept. 11, 2008, with the help of [Mark Miller](#) and his missing child rescue team with American Association For Lost Children Inc.

Three years later she’s joined Miller’s rescue team, and helped bring home two missing children, including a child from Van Nuys, Calif., in late June.

“This is probably the best thing that I can do with my life. It’s my calling,” said Ibarra. “This is what I’m supposed to do. The Lord is speaking to me. Maybe this happened for a reason.”

Ibarra decided to channel her son’s ordeal into a positive outcome for the rest of her life.

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"I'm scarred for life. I'm very, very protective over Dylan," said Ibarra. "Yes, I'm scarred for life, but I made that scar beautiful. I brought the positive out of it. I'm looking at it like it happened for a reason."

First rescue

Ibarra joined AAFLC for a child rescue mission in 2009 to Oaxaca, Mexico, helping to recover a boy who'd been missing about four years.

"On the first case, we're successful in rescuing the child, and just that moment seeing the mother and her son reunited again, you cannot explain that moment," said Ibarra. "There's no words that can explain that. I mean it's just beautiful.

"I feel like I did something," she added. "I made a difference in a child's life."

The adventure wasn't without its mishaps. Miller recalled the boy vomiting on Ibarra's coat while the rescue team was driving through rough terrain.

Amber Ibarra rescued her son, Dylan, in September 2008 with the help of Mark Miller and AAFLC. Dylan is now 6 years old, and entering first grade. / Josh Arntz/The Herald

The rescue operations also put the team members in a foreign environment, at the mercy of local politics and law. Wesley Johnson, a member of Miller's rescue team, posed as a priest when Miller, Ibarra and the rest of the team

entered Mexico to [complete](#) their latest rescue in June. Miller hoped the disguise would parley any hostile tensions. Ibarra said her first rescue from Oaxaca got "a little rowdy."

"When you do get in a dangerous situation, you just better bow your head and [start](#) praying, because I mean God is good," explained Ibarra. "The last mission we went on was not dangerous at all... And with Dylan's case our lives were never really in danger.

"So when you get in a dangerous or sticky situation, you just kind of pray your way through and God will lead you completely all the way there," she added.

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Latest mission

AAFLC rescued 7-year-old Leahlani Salinas June 24 from Queretaro, Mexico, where she was in her mother's non-custodial guardianship. Miller's team, including Ibarra, crossed into the United States with the girl June 26.

The girl's father, John Salinas, of Sherman Oaks, Calif., contacted AAFLC in March, and Miller's team began verifying her abduction and coordinating their rescue effort.

The team first assures there's custody documentation from a federal or state court for the searching parent, then verifies the missing child is registered with the National Crime Information Center. The team also obtains an original copy of the child's U.S. birth certificate. The team brings five copies of all the documentation – notarized, translated into Spanish (or applicable language), and stamped with a federal or state seal – on the missions.

Supervising Detective Angelica Romeral, with LAPD Van Nuys Detective Division, explained the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office reviewed Salinas' case and issued a warrant Aug. 16, 2010, for Leahlani's mother, Lizie Olhagaray for one count of felony child custody deprivation.

The rescue

Miller's team coalsced June 23 in Houston from their respective locations and flew into Mexico City. They rented a vehicle and spent the rest of the day observing Leahlani's reported location.

The team called it a day around 10 or 11 p.m. June 23, crashed at a hotel, and returned to surveillance June 24. The team waited and waited for the girl to appear from a Queretaro residence.

Leahlani eventually left the residence and walked down the street with another young girl. The girls disappeared into another building, so Ibarra, who speaks fluent Spanish, exited the rental vehicle for a better perspective.

"As soon as I made eye contact with the little girl they were walking back toward the street, and I just turn around and I look at Mark and I look at John (Salinas)," recalled Ibarra. "I look at them and I'm like, 'Go. Now. Now is your chance.'

"So John jumps out. He runs and he picks Leahlani up," added Ibarra. "Mark shows his badge to any witnesses looking, and throws court papers right there where we got her and we took off."

The team then deposited the rental vehicle, and headed for the U.S.-Mexico border at Brownsville, Texas, returning to home soil with Leahlani around 1-2 a.m. June 26. They caught a ride to Corpus Christ, Texas, rented two small vehicles from the local airport and headed to San Antonio, where they each went their separate ways.

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The feeling

Before recovering his daughter, Salinas asked Ibarra what the moment was like when you first see your missing child again. She told him that was an indescribable sensation he'd have to experience for himself. During their return home, Ibarra said Salinas acknowledged there were no words to describe his reunion with Leahlani.

"I asked him, I said, 'John, what was that moment like?'" said Ibarra, "and he looked at me and tears were running down his face and he likes, 'You're right. I can't describe that moment. I know exactly what you mean.'"

Ibarra will continue volunteering her time for AAFLC rescue operations "until the day I can't."

"The way I look at it is when I called Mark, he didn't tell me no, so why should I tell him no when he calls me," said Ibarra.

Miller said the team is already planning another rescue operation, and hopes to return to Mexico by September, at the latest, to recover another child.

"I think the world of Amber," added Miller. "I don't think there's too many people who have a heart of gold like that, to be a young mother and going back to Mexico and helping others.

"She's one of a kind, and she's a blessing," he said.

Romeral noted Olhagaray still has an active felony warrant through LAPD.

"But it doesn't appear that we're going to extradite," said Romeral. "They don't extradite in Mexico for child abduction."

For more information about AAFLC, go online to www.aafc.org or call 1-800-375-5683.

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