



BOY HUNT ENDS SUCCESSFULLY

By Louise Cassano

A 2½ YEARS OLD, CHRISTIAN BALADO HAS LOGGED SEVERAL THOUSAND AIR TRAVEL MILES AND WAS THE SUBJECT OF AN INTERNATIONAL BOY HUNT. But, Christian is back home living securely in Centereach with his father James and his grandmother, Lynne Polistina.

A 13-month ordeal drew to a close on Friday, Jan. 15, when James and Christian returned to the United States after a vigilant surveillance by a non-profit group called The American Association for Lost Children accomplished in three days what American and German authorities could not in 13 months.

Christian was found living with his grandmother in Bad Kruenach, Germany, in an apartment that had been searched just weeks before by German authorities, who found no evidence of the boy or his mother Elvira, who is alleged to have abducted the child. American and German authorities have issued arrest warrants for Elvira, who remains living in Germany.

Christian and his mother were found missing Dec. 17, when Balado returned home from work, just 15 days after Elvira returned from a six-week visit to Germany, where she was born and raised. Polistina says information she and James have acquired since Christian's return alleges that Elvira met a former boyfriend on her visit and wanted to return to Germany to be with him, but she didn't want to be separated from her son.

At no time during the year Christian was missing, says Balado, did he fear that the child was in a life-threatening situation or being abused. Elvira, he says, had never exhibited such tendencies, but he and Polistina suspected neglect due to what Polistina describes as Elvira's "preponderance for herself."

"I didn't think she would hurt him. I knew she was neglecting him — dropping him off at other people's homes," says the 30-year-old father, a mechanic, who works at Hi-Tech Automotive in Ronkonkoma, who married Elvira Stuhn in June, 1990.

"I didn't have my son and that was all I

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BOY REUNITED WITH FATHER



Christian Balado and his father James were reunited through the heroic work of the American Association for Lost Children.

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wanted," he says, adding that Christian, which he pronounces as "Christy-ahn," appeared nervous at first, but is happy to be home with him and Polistina, who owns The Mail Room at the Lake in Lake Ronkonkoma. The child shows some fear at being left with relatives, which Balado attributes to his being shuffled from one person to another when he was with his mother in Germany. He is also very quiet and does not speak much — not unusual, Polistina says she has learned, for a child who has been hidden and is often told to be quiet so his whereabouts are not uncovered.

Christian was found through the efforts of the AALC, an organization dedicated to finding lost children and reuniting them with their loved ones. The Houston, Texas-based association was started five years ago by Mark Miller, who says "I was at the time of my life when I needed to do something."

In 1987, by all appearances, it seemed that Miller was doing something and doing it quite well. He made some money ("... a few thousand," he says) as a stockbroker, which he invested in convenience stores and was reaping a good living from his endeavors. But, as he puts it, "Something was missing from my life." Miller says he began reading the Bible more and realized that happiness was in helping people and serving the Lord. He calls his reawakening a "rebirth."

He often read fliers and product containers that had "Have You Seen Me?" information on missing children and began to wonder whether any of those children were ever found. Miller claims that after doing some research, he learned that the organizations that ran these ads were not doing any physical leg work and believed that they were deceiving people. He decided to start an organization — one that would take on investigation, tracking and surveillance — to help people searching for missing children.

He quit his job, put what monies he had into his new endeavor and took to the streets selling candy bars to raise funds to meet expenses.

"My family thought I was crazy. I wasn't even married then," says Miller who, at 34 years old, is now married to Carmen Esparza Miller, who volunteers with him in his work and accompanied him on the trip to Germany to find Christian. Also accompanying them was Sheila Baldwin and Val Cunningham, who speaks German and was, Miller says, the "real hero" in this case because she was able to convince those under investigation that she was a national to gain access to the apartment house where Elvira's grandmother lives and where they suspected Christian was being hidden.

The organization still raises money through candy sales, but now uses vending machines to dispense the product. Many of the group's staff spend a large portion of time fund raising. Donations are key, representing the group's major source of income. Continental Airlines contributes air travel in the continental United States and ATC long distance phone company donates its services.

The work of AALC has been widely publicized in the past three years on television, in print and over national talk radio. In September of 1992, both "Inside Edition" and "CBS 48 Hours" aired programs about it. Polistina saw the shows and suggested to Balado that they contact the group. AALC agreed to help and embarked on their trip Jan. 14, returning three days later with Christian.

"We got into the country and got the job done," says Miller, who emphasizes that their work, though quickly done, was not easy, having to learn road signs, navigate streets to find a quick escape route, locate police and develop a ploy that would ingratiate them with the people they wanted to meet. Describing the escapade, Miller says, "We hardly ate or slept."