

Latrobe Bulletin

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Latrobe organization plays role in rescue of kidnapped Florida girl

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Since being formed in 1987, the American Association for Lost Children (AAFLC) has resulted in the rescue of more than 135 abducted or abused children.

The Latrobe-based organization added to its impressive rescue total last month, when it helped reunite a kidnapped girl with her father in Florida.

But unlike many cases that AAFLC founder/CEO Mark Miller has dug into over the past quarter century, this one had more than its fair share of twists and turns.

And much of the drama wasn't tied directly to little Anjalayiah Hicks, a 10-year-old kidnapped in 2013 from her Georgia home, but those around her — a mother who moved to Mexico and later wound up in an American jail, an abusive stepfather who used the girl as ransom, and a father searching for answers, not to mention his child.

"There's a lot of craziness to this case," said Miller, a Greater Latrobe Senior High School and St. Vincent College graduate.

It all began nearly three years ago with a phone call, when a relative of Shundy Hicks, the child's father, notified AAFLC that she was missing.

Not long after, one of the organization's detectives unearthed the child's whereabouts — in Pénjamo, a municipality within Guanajuato, Mexico, where she was living

with her non-custodial American mother and Spanish stepfather.

Miller and several of his California-based private investigators traveled to Mexico in October 2013 with the intention of bringing the girl back to the United States, but ran into customs issues with local officials and came home empty-handed.

"They would not let us have the child," Miller said.

In time, Miller and investigators found out that her mother returned to the States a few times per year. During one visit, the woman, who owed child support payments, was placed in an American jail.

Her jail stay led to advanced talks with Anjalayiah's stepfather, who remained out of the country and was willing to give the child up for money.

"We thought this was going to be playing hardball," Miller said of the stepfather's monetary requests. "At this point, the longer the wife stays in jail, the (bigger) the problem. She's part of the cash cow for him."

The man's urgency produced the same impulse last month for Miller, his team and Shundy, who all took a flight to Mexico City and drove several hours to the family home.

When they arrived, they uncovered Anjalayiah and a stepfather whose demands had been whittled down to nothing.

"He didn't need money," Miller said. "He just gave the child up."

With a passport in tow and her father by her side, Anjalayiah boarded a American-bound flight the next day.

Although Anjalayiah and Shundy started to bond before she even hopped on a plane, Miller said the reconnecting process usually isn't an instantaneous thing.

"They've been told lies, so they have to reprogram their mind and see that this is a loving person," Miller said. "We've seen it over and over — it usually takes about an hour before the transition happens, the light bulb comes on and they start to realize (they're safe)."

That's what happened with Anjalayiah, who Miller said was quiet and distant on the drive to the airport, but sprung to life while playing foosball when the group stopped for a bite for eat.

"She was just happy," he said of Anjalayiah, who lives in Tampa with her father, stepmother and two stepsiblings. "There's a lot of abuse in this, so often you're not only rescuing a child, but you're getting them out of an abusive (situation). They're now able to reconnect with a parent they've never bonded with before and enter a different environment."

Anjalayiah's story is also being made into a short film, as a New York-based producer documented on video much of what took place over the past two years.

Past rescues have received similar treatment, Miller said, as he has attempted to find missing children in such far-flung places as Lebanon, Germany, Romania and more.

The AAFLC — a Christian based, nonprofit, tax-exempt charity that performs rescues at no cost to the searching family — thrives through fundraising. Investigators assist on a volunteer basis, Miller said, with the organization paying for their airfare, hotel, food and rental vehicles.



American Association For Lost Children founder/CEO Mark Miller (bottom row, middle) and his team of detectives helped rescue 10-year-old Anjalayiah Hicks (bottom row second from left) from Mexico and reunite the girl with her father, Shundy Hicks, in Florida. Since being formed in 1987, Miller's Latrobe based organization has resulted in the rescue of more than 135 abducted or abused children.

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