

'A matter of days': Lakemoor woman, children rescued after 9 years of captivity in Mexico

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LAKEMOOR – Samantha Zubor stood near the entryway of her mother's townhome, gazing out the window at her four children as they played with some neighbors in the grass-centered cul-de-sac.

Turning back toward the living room, she wiped away a tear with the back of her hand, sat down at a table and resumed her story.

Nine years. Nine years of torment. Nine years of those children sleeping on a dirt floor, being in the same room with Zubor as she repeatedly was beaten and frequently raped. For many of those nine years, her older two children were made to work in a mezcal – an alcoholic beverage – factory from sun up to evening.

They never played with the neighbors. Not there.

It's still difficult for Zubor to believe it is over.

"When I talk about it, I'll cry," she said. "But usually, I'm just overly happy. ... I'm so excited – so excited to be back."

Read a timeline of Zubor's story here.

Zubor, 30, grew up in suburban Cook County, where she admittedly was a bit of a wild child. Zubor met Leo Garcia when she was 14. By the time Zubor was 18, she and Garcia had a boy, Anthony, and they lived together in a Rolling Meadows apartment.

Garcia, an undocumented immigrant, worked in a nearby factory.

"I was crazy about him," Zubor said.

One day, Garcia was gone.

"They just showed up at the house," she said. "It was November 2007. He was deported."

The young, suddenly single mom fell into a deep depression after U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers took Garcia away.

"I met Julio a few months later, and I clung to him," she said of a man who, two years later and many months after they no longer were dating, allegedly would lure Zubor across the Mexican border in part by claiming he would help reunite her with Garcia.

Instead, he took her, her then-2-year-old son, Anthony, and an infant he'd fathered, Benjamin, to a remote, mountainous region of Oaxaca, Mexico, where Zubor said her repeated pleas to go home with her boys were met with repeated beatings.

Years of captivity followed, with twists and turns so surreal they are difficult to believe. But then one registers the scars along Zubor's brow, touches the dent in the back of her skull, sees the "Find Samantha Zubor & Her 2 missing boys!" Facebook page, reads investigative reports and sees the emergency passports.

Then there's the tale of the Mexican-American private investigator who this past spring traveled to rural Oaxaca City to rescue Zubor.

What unfolds is the gritty, grueling story of an impulsive 20-year-old who survived a horrific ordeal.

Zubor recently sat in the basement of the Lakemoor home she and her children share with her mother, Barb Zubor, and her mother's wife, Chere Sazma, who have been together for decades and married three years. The room was filled with furnishings, toys, bedding and clothing donated by area residents who learned on social media of the return of Samantha and her kids with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

"For the first two weeks, I couldn't sleep," Samantha said. "I didn't want to wake up being there."

Her 8-year-old daughter, Jazmin, played on the floor with a remote-controlled, wheeled whirlingig Barb Zubor bought for her granddaughter at Walmart. Anthony, who now is 12, carried a tray of Legos upstairs to the dining room table, where Benjamin and the youngest, 6-year-

old Emilio, also were headed.

"I kept waking up," Samantha said. "I'd walk around in circles in the kitchen."

After nine years – and having given up at some point on ever seeing her American family again – waking up safe in the home where she lived during her teenage years seemed the more unlikely reality.

Samantha looked down, then straight ahead as she reflected on the San Jose Rio Minas house where she said Julio Gomez Sanchez enforced a harshly controlled and frequently violent existence.

"It was like being in solitary confinement, but with your four kids," she said. "At least if you're in jail, you're not getting beat up every day."

Gomez Sanchez is accused of illegal deprivation of freedom, domestic violence and rape, according to prosecutorial paperwork filed in Oaxaca, Mexico, as part of proceedings to secure emergency passports for Samantha and her four children.

On Aug. 11, Oaxaca police Capt. José Raymundo Tuñón Jauregui issued a statement that 34-year-old Gomez Sanchez had been arrested and charged with those crimes, and then was released on an unspecified bond.

Samantha believed Gomez Sanchez when he told her he would give her money and help her reunite with Garcia if she would help him get a vehicle across the U.S.-Mexico border. He said he'd give her a lump sum as child support for their then-4-month-old boy, Benjamin. And then they'd part. And she'd never have to see him again.

"I was just supposed to be the driver, because I had a license," she said. "He calls and says, 'I have this new car. I'm leaving. I'm going to be gone forever. Come down with me and I'll pay you. ... Once you're done, you can just go to Mexico City and contact Leo.' "

Samantha agreed. The pair departed with the two young boys in April 2009. It would be the last Samantha's American family would see of her until this past April.

"We passed through the border on May 1, 2009," Samantha said. "I remember the police saying, 'You have three months until we change the law and you need a passport to cross.' "

Back then, U.S. visitors needed only a birth certificate to enter Mexico, which was what Samantha had brought. She met the border police's warning with a shoulder shrug. After all, she hoped to connect with Garcia and had no intention of staying in Mexico for long.

"I was planning to come back in a matter of days," she said.

From the Laredo, Texas, crossing point, Gomez Sanchez steered south. Hours passed. The terrain grew increasingly hilly and rural.

"He drove to a ranch in the middle of the mountains, five hours from any city," Samantha said. "If you would have seen the mountains, you'd have been freaked out. But I was 20, and I trusted him."

It wouldn't be long before Samantha awakened to the seriousness of her mistake.

The countertops in the Zubor-Sazma kitchen were covered with containers of chicken and pasta salad, Italian beef, beer, wine and tequila. Samantha's stepmother, Chere Sazma; her brother, Michael Zubor; her best friend, Lindsay Savage; her uncle, Ed Spagnolo; brother-in-law, James Jonas; and nephews, Alex and Everett Sanderson, milled about, receiving occasional updates from Barb Zubor and Sazma's daughter, Reneé Sanderson-Jonas, about the group's progress from O'Hare International Airport.

Sam was coming home, and she was bringing not only the two children she'd had when she disappeared, but two more who had been born in Mexico.

"It was just before Mother's Day nine years ago that she left," Sazma said. "It was horrible. You just didn't even know anymore if she was still alive. ... How Barb survived all that, I don't know. There's a part of you that just dies. And there's a part that hopes she's still out there somewhere."

Samantha Zubor's friends and relatives spilled out onto the sidewalk as a limousine pulled into the driveway the night she came home. Some laughed, some cried and everyone hugged as she and her children worked their way through the line that formed between a handicapped railing and the garage. Stopping a few times along the way, Samantha pressed her hands to her face and bent forward in a gesture of delighted disbelief.

"For the first two mornings after we got her in Mexico, she'd wake up and throw her arms around me and say, 'Am I really here?' " said

Barb Zubor, who along with Sanderson-Jonas accompanied California-based private investigator John Poblete and Mexican judicial police officer Jose Chavira on the mountainside village rescue.

"I'm amazed by Samantha's patience, her humor with the kids," Barb Zubor said. "She's like Mary Poppins. That she kept their spirits so high? It's so amazing."

Samantha looked from one person to the next that night. Her feet would not keep still. She talked with each guest, a formerly English-only speaker now slipping smoothly back and forth between English and Spanish.

At first, in spring 2009, Samantha could not believe what was happening. She was in the middle of nowhere with two young children, no way out and no way to call for help. She sobbed and begged to go home.

"For the first three or four days, he'd say, 'Yes, I'll drive you tomorrow.' Then he'd leave for the whole day and come back insanely drunk. ... There was a mattress on a dirt floor. There was a phone, but he'd take the cord with him when he'd leave. I had no diapers. I used a shirt or let the children be naked sometimes," Samantha said.

"And getting hit, that started right away."

She quickly learned that crying was a surefire way to draw a beating.

"I have scars on my eyebrows," Samantha said. "It wasn't just once in a while. It was every day. He was doing this so I'd stop asking to go. And he'd do it in front of people – five or six guys he'd been drinking with, they would just watch. ... That was my life for nine years."

Samantha recalls being kicked in the face, hit in the back of the head with a rock and struck on the shin with a jack handle, not to mention raped – and impregnated – repeatedly. Never was she permitted medical attention, although some of the wounds that resulted from beatings became dangerously infected.

She's certain more than one of her pregnancies was terminated by beatings. The two children who were born in Mexico were delivered by C-sections at small clinics, where Samantha said Gomez Sanchez warned her not to ask for help beyond birthing the children, and from which she was whisked back to the crude villa within hours after surgery.

He also refused to obtain birth certificates for Jazmin and Emilio. Doing so would require an official record, including the mother's name – a potential lead for anyone who might be looking for Samantha.

For her first several years in Mexico, Samantha was not allowed to leave the house except to go outside to do laundry, and then only when Gomez Sanchez was present. He told her many times that he loved her. She never responded in kind, occasionally risking more beatings by replying that she hated him and only wanted to go home.

Samantha sometimes cursed God, but she prayed for the day when someone would rescue her. Meanwhile, Gomez Sanchez told her that clearly her family did not care that she was gone or they would have come for her by now.

This was her life, here with him. Accept it, he said.

Back in Illinois, on a weekend in early May, Samantha and her four children piled into two cars with her father, Michael Zubor of Streamwood, and stepmother, Janelle Zubor, for a trip to the Wisconsin Dells.

The children only had seen one swimming pool before – the one at the hotel in Oaxaca, where they stayed while the family's emergency passports were prepared. Here, an indoor water park awaited.

"Samantha's is an incredible story," her father said. "I kept listening to Sam and her kids on the trip up thinking, 'This is not real.' They were telling stories about killing their own food, and I'd look at the kids and say, 'Really?' and they'd say, 'Yes, grandpa.' "

Although he prefers to focus on the positive, Michael Zubor laments the events that led to his daughter's departure and, of course, the horror that followed.

"Originally, she was gone, and I thought, 'Well, that's what she wanted to do,' " he said. "She wanted out of the house and to live her life. At first, I wasn't worried."

As the years passed, Michael Zubor struggled to cope emotionally both with the idea that his daughter might never be heard from again – that she might, in fact, be dead – and that his son, Michael, suffered from a life-threatening heart condition.

Now, with Samantha home, her brother better and his own recent marriage to Janelle, Michael Zubor looks forward to continued chances to reconnect with his daughter and spend more time with his grandkids.

"She's like Linda Hamilton in 'Terminator,' " he said of Samantha. "She's strong."

Joliet Herald-News associate editor Lindsay Gloor provided translations for this report.

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part story about Samantha Zubor and her children, who were held in Mexico for nine years before being rescued and returning home to Lakemoor earlier this year. Part II will be in Monday's Northwest Herald.

- **Caption:** Samantha Zubor (left) and her son, Anthony Zubor (right), 12, are reunited with Samantha's mother, Barb Zubor, and stepsister, Reneé Sanderson-Jonas, after being held captive for almost nine years in Oaxaca, Mexico.

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