

'You're going home': Lakemoor woman reunites with family, works to reintegrate

Northwest Herald, The (Crystal Lake, IL) - September 17, 2018

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- Section: Counties

Samantha Zubor tried to escape. One evening three years ago, when her alleged captor, Julio Gomez Sanchez, came home and passed out drunk, she piled her children in his truck, took 10 liters of gasoline in Coca-Cola bottles, left a TV playing so he might think they still were there if he stirred, and drove to Nochixtlan.

"We got there about 11 or 12 at night," she said. "It's a town of maybe 2,000 people. Everything was closed, so I parked on the side of the road.

"Me and the four kids fell asleep in the car. As it's getting light the next morning, he's pounding on the window, yelling 'Open the [expletive] car, now!' "

Samantha turned the ignition key and drove to a nearby bus station.

"I pulled in honking the horn. I jumped out screaming," she said. "I ran to a lady at the bus station desk. I said 'Help, help, help! He's coming!' "

Gomez Sanchez arrived.

"I'm screaming and crying and nobody helps me," Samantha said. "He took (her 8-year-old daughter) Jazmin and drove off. I had no money. I just sat at that bus station crying and crying."

Twenty or 30 people witnessed the scene, Samantha said. No one helped. Eventually, Gomez Sanchez returned.

"I wouldn't move from that bench because I thought 'I'm going to die. He's going to kill me,' " she said. "But I finally went back, because I had nothing. The kids were hungry. ... I'd spent six years getting beaten. I knew it was going to happen again, but I had nowhere else to go."

She never stopped telling the children that one day their nightmare would end. One day they'd go to the U.S., and they'd have a better life – a normal life.

It would take three more years, however – and a chance occurrence that proved to Samantha that her family and friends still were looking for her – before she'd summon the courage to try again.

[Read Part I of this story here](#)

Private investigator John Poblete got a call from Mark Miller of the American Association for Lost Children in late February.

"Mark had heard from a family in Illinois," said Poblete, who is an investigator with K&K Confidential in northern California. Poblete also is president of the Global Child Rescue Group, which he co-founded with his business partner and fellow investigator, Jeff Kaplan.

"We've been assisting Mark with cases in Mexico for six and a half or seven years. Fortunately, thank God, we've been able to reunite a lot of children with their [custodial] parents," Poblete said. "But this case was different.

"The mother was essentially taken against her will. This would be a case of [more than] reuniting legal parents with children."

Samantha's mother, Barb Zubor, and stepsister, Reneé Sanderson-Jonas, had contacted Miller. They'd heard from Samantha. They knew where she was. They wanted to go get her, but they needed help. Miller put Barb Zubor and Sanderson-Jonas in touch with Poblete.

"I'm a first-generation Mexican-American born here in California," Poblete said. "Through my family contacts in Mexico, I have been able to establish a relationship with certain government officials. ... I'm bilingual, fluent in Spanish. And we also work with a specific judicial law enforcement officer who lives in Mexico.

"His knowledge of the system has proved to be, without a doubt, a tremendous benefit."

News that U.S. government officials were separating small children from their families who were seeking entry into the U.S. had become a hot issue. It is not uncommon, however, for people living in the U.S. to abscond with noncustodial children in the opposite direction,

Poblete said.

"There's literally hundreds of these cases," he said. "We've had cases where an uncle or an aunt would take a child [to Mexico] without authorization as a form of punishment or revenge. It causes a lot of problems for the children, and it happens all too often."

Poblete said he personally has worked on eight such cases, including the Zubors' case.

"I think this was actually the most difficult case to go on because of the logistics, but also the potential for danger, because we were really in no man's land," he said. "And we carried no weapons."

Poblete is trained in operating firearms and served in the U.S. Marines in the 1980s. But the rules regarding carrying firearms in Mexico are strict, and the consequences of landing oneself in a Mexican jail if caught doing so are dire. Even Mexican judicial police officer Jose Chavira was not legally permitted to carry a weapon in Oaxaca.

"Jose and I decided if we were going to do this," Poblete said, "we were going to use our wits."

Read a timeline of Zubor's story here.

Late in 2017, Gomez Sanchez's cousin gave him a cellphone to pay off a debt. The phone was not equipped with a carrier service, but it had games on it, and Gomez Sanchez allowed Samantha's 12-year-old son, Anthony, to play with it one afternoon in February when they traveled to a city and stopped at a restaurant.

While Gomez Sanchez used the bathroom, Anthony told his mother that the phone was connected to the restaurant's Wi-Fi.

"I Googled my name," Samantha said. "I found the [Find Samantha Zubor & Her 2 missing boys!] Facebook page. I saw they were all looking for me.

"He'd told me 'Nobody is looking for you,' and after all of those years, I started to believe it. And then I found this page, and I knew no matter what happened, I had to try. ... It saved my life, that page."

Samantha began to strategize. She had been in Mexico for so long now that she had achieved slivers of freedom – periods of about a half-hour when she was permitted out of the home and out of Gomez Sanchez's sight. Specifically, she was allowed to walk up the mountain to get her older two boys from their after-school music lessons.

She timed the trek. She looked for one of the tiny, home-based shops where people sometimes could rent use of a phone. She ran so that she'd have extra time to stop. She asked to use the phone in one of the little shops. The phone there had no service, she was told, although she had seen others using it.

On another day, she tried another shop.

"I was so surprised when they said yes," she said. "Barb picked up. It was Feb. 26, and I said I can't talk long, but this is where I am. I described every step from Oaxaca City, step-by-step directions to the ranch."

Samantha told her mother she and her now four children were living in horrific conditions and that Gomez Sanchez beat and raped her. The children, too, were beaten. They needed help. And help should arrive between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on a Friday, because that's when she knew Gomez Sanchez would not be home.

Barb Zubor and Sanderson-Jonas met with Poblete and Chavira on April 5 in Oaxaca City. In the early-morning hours of April 6, they set out in two rented cars, a four-door Mitsubishi sedan and a Chevrolet Cruze. About a half-hour down the federal highway outside of Oaxaca City, they veered onto a dirt road.

"We went four to four and a half hours down partly paved, other times gravel and occasionally dirt roads barely wide enough for one vehicle to pass through," Poblete said. "We went over mountain ranges and through valleys. We knew we had to keep going up and up and up."

The group passed through several small towns. Chavira, who was in the lead, occasionally stopped to describe the location they sought and asked locals whether they were heading in the right direction.

"Samantha was able to provide specific landmarks," Poblete said. "One was a small stream coming down the side of the road with a cement bridge over it. Another was a big tractor tire that was off to the side of the house."

It was about 1:30 or 2 p.m. when they arrived.

"I could see the kids outside the house," he said. "They had been on the lookout for us."

Poblete shot snippets of video as the stepsisters hugged and cried. Then mother and daughter embraced. "It's over, honey," Barb Zubor said. "You're going home."

In one clip, Barb Zubor introduces Poblete to her 6-year-old grandson, Emilio, who she didn't know existed only a few weeks earlier. Concerned that their departure had been slowed because Chavira's vehicle became temporarily wedged on the bridge, Poblete is heard urging everyone to move quickly.

"Come on," he said. "We've got to go."

The ride down the mountain was frantic.

In the Mitsubishi with Poblete were Sanderson-Jonas and Anthony. Jazmin, 9-year-old Benjamin, Emilio, Samantha and Barb Zubor rode with Chavira.

"Approximately an hour and a half to an hour and 45 minutes into the ride, we spotted him," Poblete said. "This was on our third stop along the way, because the children got sick and Samantha got sick. We were going so fast. It was a very bumpy, curvy ride. They got car sick."

On this stop, Poblete looked back and saw a red Nissan truck barreling toward them.

"Oh my God, get in the car!" Poblete yelled to the kids.

Gomez Sanchez caught up with them and pulled up next to the two cars. Chavira told him to back off or there would be consequences, and the two rescue cars set off again. At this point, Benjamin had joined the group in Poblete's car.

"The children were hysterical," Poblete said. "Anthony was yelling, 'He's going to kill mom, and then he's going to kill us!' Reneé was doing everything she could to comfort the boys. I really applaud her calmness."

With the children hunkered down on the floors of their respective cars, the group sped on.

Gomez Sanchez followed.

Samantha recently arrived at the Department of Motor Vehicles in Woodstock to obtain a new driver's license.

"They said I no longer existed," she said. "They had no record of me. I had to go redo my Social Security information, too. I've been running around these last few weeks from office to office."

None of that fazes her, however. Inconvenience is nothing compared with captivity. Not even the news that Leo Garcia, the man she originally traveled to Mexico in search of, died in a 2007 car wreck breaks her, although it certainly prompts tears.

Surrounded by her kids' emergency passports, their U.S. citizens-born-abroad Consular certificates and other paperwork on a recent afternoon, Samantha counted her blessings. Her children adjusting well and happily to their new surroundings was chief among them.

"I think if I was one of those persons who hid in my room all day, it would be really hard on them," she said. "They were pretty much in the house with me or working all of the time. ... I put on a smile for them no matter what."

About a half-hour after the Zubors and their rescuers first saw Gomez Sanchez, he zipped past them along the dirt road and kept going.

"I pulled up to Jose," Poblete said. "Everyone was hysterical. I said, 'We're going to go slow for the next few miles. Keep your eyes out. There's a little town up ahead that should have a police force, and we're going to report this immediately.' "

When they arrived in the town, Chavira and Poblete spoke with the local police and the town's mayor. They arranged a police escort along a different route than the one Gomez Sanchez took – a shortcut that also led to the federal highway. Less than two hours later, they were at a hotel in Oaxaca City.

Days-long interviews at the U.S. Consulate and the offices of Justicia para las Mujeres (Justice for Women) awaited, as did a plane ride

and a limo trip from O'Hare International Airport to Lakemoor. But for that evening, their travels were through.

"Those two boys are so proud," Barb Zubor said of Anthony and Benjamin. "They saved their money from playing music at festivals [in Mexico]. That's the money Samantha used to make her phone call."

Barb Zubor, her wife and Sanderson-Jonas beam when they talk about having Samantha and her children back home. Neither Sanderson-Jonas' recent job loss – she said a Barrington real estate investment firm fired her for taking time off to go to Mexico – nor Barb Zubor's job loss for the same reason curbs their elation.

"I was determined to do whatever it took to get Sam and the kids home," Sanderson-Jonas said. "I was heartbroken when I heard the stories of abuse and saw the terror in the kids' eyes on our way down the mountain. ... I am beyond happy and full of love to have my stepsister, adorable niece and nephews home where they belong."

No one is happier than Samantha, who in June began working at her first paying job.

Today, all four of her children are enrolled in Big Hollow School District 38, where they attend Big Hollow Primary, Elementary and Middle schools.

"I survived for my children," Samantha said. "They get to be kids now."

Nearby, Anthony places small gray Lego blocks atop more gray blocks, forming the wall of a rectangular structure with "prison bars" in one window. Across the table, Benjamin holds a Twister game and laughs at his little brother, Emilio, who's hiding behind the living room curtains.

Jazmin notes the rain outside has stopped.

"Mom, can we ride on our bikes?" she said.

"Mom, come check out the house I'm building," Anthony said.

"Tony, that's really cool," his mother said. "Really cool."

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

Editor's note: This is the second in a two-part story of 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 I was in Sunday's Northwest Herald.

• **Caption:** Samantha Zubor eats with her children Aug. 8 at their home in Lakemoor.

• *Record:* 97e360c7d1cceedfa3e0d9f1df667aec61a47c

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