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SMUGGLING CHILDREN, Part II: Three tries, \$2,300 later, mom, son reunited

Extortion, demand for money complicate plans

By Michael Marizco

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

NORTH CAROLINA - The same night his little brother crosses the border into the United States, Moises Lopez tries, too.

A smuggler retained by his mother drives the 13-year-old boy to the green metal wall of the U.S.-Mexican border. After a short walk, the man bends forward and laces his fingers together, forming an impromptu stepladder for Moises.

Up and over the border wall, he lands in the United States - one giant step closer to his mother, a house cleaner living illegally in North Carolina. Then, a yell and a flurry of lights as two agents jump out of a white SUV. The boy stops, standing still, as the agents approach him.

By 11 a.m. the next day, he's back in Mexico, back for the second time at the Center for Repatriated Minors, a shelter

Audio slide show

View images of one family's quest to bring two Mexican boys into the United States. With audio commentary from border reporter Michael Marizco and photographer Kelly Presnell.

Launch slide show

(Audio may begin automatically, so adjust your sound accordingly)

Interactive Map

Follow the brothers' journey from Oaxaca, Mexico to North Carolina

Launch map

About this series

Part One

Noé and Moises Lopez begin their journey to a new life with the mother they haven't seen in eight years.

Part Two

The journey Reyna Lopez planned for her boys was to be quick and safe. But one boy disappears into a smuggling network where deals

so far this year deported to Nogales, Sonora, after being caught crossing the border without an adult. The children - more than 6,000 of them this year along the entire U.S.-Mexican border - are trying to join their parents, who came here in search of opportunity that eludes them in Mexico.

Parents used to travel back and forth to visit their families in Mexico. But a tighter post-9/11 border has made that difficult. So parents move here, settle in and then hire smugglers to bring their children across - a journey that can take a week or more and cost at least \$1,500 per child.

Moises is three weeks into his journey. And by 3 p.m. this October day, he is trying again, a third time, following the directions of a successful Nogales, Sonora, smuggler called El Toro - the bull.

This time, as a man working for El Toro laces his fingers to offer a boost over the border wall, three white pickup trucks pull up, their red and white emergency lights flashing. A group of Nogales, Sonora, *operativos* - elite police units - surround them. One officer, wearing the unit's customary black, gray and white fatigues, separates the smuggler from the boy and speaks softly to him - so softly it's hard for Moises to hear. But he makes out some important words between the smuggler and one of the

are made and promises aren't always kept.

NewsTalk

- *How should the Border Patrol deal with Mexican children who are left behind when their families try to cross into the United States?*
- *Should any effort be made to help reunite them with their parents or other relatives?*

Share your thoughts on NewsTalk. Responses will be published on Tuesday's Opinion page. A sample will be selected to offer a range of opinions.

Please include your name, a phone number for verification and information about yourself, such as your occupation. Comments should reach us by noon.

E-mail: newsq@azstarnet.com. Limited to four sentences.

Phone messages: 434-4094. Please spell your name. Responses become Star property.

The series

Border reporter Michael Marizco, 32, spent three months investigating the business of smuggling children into the United States.

Noé and Moises Lopez are two of those children, who each day enter sophisticated, sometimes dangerous, smuggling networks that reunite children with parents living here illegally.

Marizco met the boys at a Nogales, Sonora, deported kids' shelter, then he and photojournalist Kelly Presnell traveled to North Carolina for the end of the boys' journeys.

"\$600."

"Return him to you tomorrow."

"Pay me."

The smuggler runs off. Moises is taken away for interrogation.

"Where are you taking me?" Moises asks the officer as he is searched.

The cop says nothing, pulling out Moises' two most precious possessions: the debit card his mother refills for him and the tattered phone book that carries her number and that of his smuggler.

"Do you know who carries these cards?" Moises remembers the officer barking. "Polleros" - smugglers.

The boy's stomach lurches. His heart pounds.

" *No, señor,*" he says quietly.

The police load him in the back of their truck and drive to the main police station.

There, Moises recounts later, the lone officer pushes him into a chair and begins to question him.

"How many people have you taken across?"

"None."

"Why do you have so much

Their story was reconstructed through observation and extensive interviews in Spanish with the boys, their family, Mexican law enforcement officials, and children and operators of the shelter.

Glossary of terms

- **OPERATIVOS:** Mexican police units that set up checkpoints and carry out raids. They are similar to a U.S. police SWAT unit. The officers are more heavily armed than typical police officers and travel in groups for protection.

- **POLLERO:** A chicken wrangler. The term is slang to describe people smugglers because they round up illegal immigrants like *pollitos*, little chickens.

- **DENUNCIAR:** To formally accuse a person, the first step in beginning a criminal investigation in Mexico. Under Mexican law, if nobody enters a formal accusation, there can be no crime. This is why, under Mexican laws, smuggling into the United States is a crime that is rarely prosecuted unless it involves bringing people from other countries into Mexico. Illegal immigrants rarely complain to police about their smuggler unless the smuggler blackmailed or kidnapped them.

Anatomy of a kidnapping

All times are approximate estimates Moises made:

Oct. 16

9 p.m. - Moises tries to cross into the United States over the high border wall in Nogales and is arrested by Border Patrol agents.

Oct. 17

11 a.m. - He's returned to the

"I don't have any money. I have my mother's card."

A click of heels on hard ground as the officer draws nearer. The boy can smell his breath.

"How much money do you have?"

"I don't have - " then stars, a sharp pain in his head as the officer backhands him.

Within hours, it's clear the smuggler isn't going to return with \$600 to pay for the boy. So the officer takes Moises to his small house and calls his mother, Reyna Lopez, in North Carolina. He's an immigration cop, he lies. Her son is being investigated as a possible smuggler. She needs to send \$130.

Mom has "no idea what to do"

For two days, Reyna won't pay the ransom.

"I have no idea what to do," she says. "These people have my baby."

If the smuggler is in the United States and she calls the police, she fears, immigration agents soon will be at her door. If he's in Mexico, she'd have to cross the border and file a complaint with Mexican authorities she doesn't trust.

She calls the smuggler in Phoenix. He curses and

Center for Repatriated Minors in Nogales, Sonora.

2:30 p.m. - Moises runs away from the center to meet his smuggler.

4 p.m. - He's arrested again at the Nogales wall by police operativos as a smuggler is trying to boost him over the top. The smuggler is told to come up with \$600 for the boy's release. Moises is interrogated at police headquarters and is accused of being a smuggler.

6 p.m. - The officer takes the boy to his own house after it becomes obvious the smuggler isn't coming with the \$600.

6:30 p.m. - The officer telephones Reyna, lying and telling her he is an immigration agent. He tells her it will cost \$130 to release Moises.

Oct. 18

noon - The officer calls Reyna again, this time giving her directions to send the money to a Nogales wire transfer store.

Oct. 20

9 a.m. - Reyna calls the smuggler in Phoenix who is supposed to bring her son and tells him of the kidnapping. The man tells her not to tell anyone and just pay the money.

Oct. 21

11:30 a.m. - Reyna wires the money to the kidnapper, who releases Moises.

1 p.m. - A street hustler spots Moises and guides him back to the Hotel San Andres, where the boy again meets up with his smuggler.

Oct. 22

midnight - Moises is boosted over

let him take care of it.

the border wall and meets his next guide in Nogales, Ariz.

As his mother is negotiating for his release, a man claiming to be Moises' uncle comes to the Nogales, Sonora, deported children's center looking for the boy. He's not there.

"This is turning into a mess," center director Fernando Guerrero says.

On Oct. 21, Reyna wires the \$130 and Moises' captor releases him on a hill overlooking the Mariposa Port of Entry.

The officer Moises says detained him is under investigation for the incident, says Nogales Police Chief Ramses Arce Fierro.

Under Mexican law, however, before he can be arrested the boy and his parents must *denunciar* - formally accuse - the officer and testify before federal authorities.

Arce Fierro admits there is corruption in his police force. Only one other Mexican state, Morelos, outranks Sonora in the number of police arrested, according to an October report by the Mexican Federal Attorney General's Office. Since 2000, 62 of them were arrested in connection with corruption - 31 from the 400-member police force of Nogales.

The math behind the corruption is simple: Nogales police earn about \$315 per month. A Mexican migrant is worth at least \$1,500 - and police know they can get a piece of that action by extorting money from desperate families.

Street hustler intervenes

Oscar Valdez, a street hustler, smokes his cigarette and watches a boy, obviously lost, walk around the block a second time.

"*Que pasó?*" - what happened? - Valdez asks him.

"I'm looking for a way down to *el San Andres*," Moises answers.

Valdez wonders if the boy has any money to steal, he admits later, then decides against it and agrees to walk him downtown, where he was headed anyway. They pass a white church and cross the railroad tracks on the way to the San Andres, a cheap hotel popular with migrants preparing to cross the border.

From there, another phone call to El Toro and yet another attempt over the border wall - the same low-tech foot-in-the-laced-fingers, up-and-over routine as last time.

This time, he makes it.

Outside Nogales, Ariz., City Hall, the boy catches a ride arranged by El Toro.

They travel in silence, the young driver watching the road, waiting to exit before the Interstate 19 Border Patrol checkpoint north of Rio Rico.

They pull off the highway, heading north on a frontage road and around the checkpoint.

At the Longhorn Grill in Amado, a second driver picks up Moises and takes him to a drop house there. The hardest part of his journey is over.

Mom saved for two years

To reunite her family, Reyna Lopez agreed to pay \$1,500 each to smuggle her two oldest boys - Moises and 11-year-old Noé - out of Mexico.

Reyna and her boyfriend, Sergio Guerrero, saved up \$500 over two years. Her brother, Juan, 28, a successful illegal immigrant who works as a roofer, comes up with the rest.

It's unlikely she can ever repay him.

"But that's not the point," he says. "That family needs to be together."

Reyna's tale is a familiar one.

Coming from Oaxaca, one of the poorest states in Mexico, she had little to look forward to on her father's cattle ranch. She came to the United States in 1996 in hopes of creating the kind of life she couldn't back home.

Eight years ago she left Moises and Noé with her parents, then found work in this country as a housekeeper and had two more children.

Now, at 30, her father has prostate cancer and Moises is running wild, beginning to drink at age 13. The boys have different fathers, and neither is around anymore.

Reyna lost her daughter, 7-year-old Jessica, in a custody dispute. Victor, the 4-year-old son she shares with Sergio, is with her. Both she and Sergio are here illegally. Victor and Jessica, born here, are both U.S. citizens.

Reyna has become a Baptist.

And now, she wants her boys back.

Some nights, Sergio, a 35-year-old construction worker, wakes up and sees her sitting on the couch, sobbing quietly into her hands.

"I think she finally reached a point where her responsibilities as a mother became more important than anything else," he says.

For him, it's a question of finances. With their \$600 a week and the disability checks Sergio gets since he injured his shoulder falling off a scaffold last year, they're barely able to cover their bills: \$600 a month in rent, \$85 a week for day care for Victor. Even though another of Reyna's brothers and his wife share the rent, money is always tight.

"But this is what she wants," Sergio says, shrugging. "And we have a son together. I'm not going away."

Noé is disappointed

Moises can't wait to join his mother, but Noé - who got here first after slipping through the Nogales port of entry in a crowd of legal crossers - is disappointed with his new life.

His new little brother, Victor, is cute enough. But he plays rough, tugging and twisting at Noé's fingers, his ears, head-butting his stomach.

The house is small with dingy white walls and an old brown carpet that Reyna and Sergio steam-cleaned in preparation for the boys' arrival. The wall around the air conditioner is sealed with duct tape.

Reyna tries to enroll Noé in day care with Victor, but they won't take him. So she leaves him at a friend's house while she goes to work.

"I just got here and she's already left again," he mutters as his mother pulls away.

It's like this every day. In the morning Reyna wakes Noé and Victor and prepares their breakfast. Then she starts calling friends and family looking for a place to leave Noé.

This isn't the life he imagined. He's sick of his little brother, there are no video games and nobody in the family is allowed to drink soda pop - only juice out of the cans Reyna buys at the Mexican market.

His third night at his new home, Noé breaks down and fumes at his new living situation.

Reyna keeps a tight smile on her face the whole time, trying to encourage Noé to eat and sit with her on the couch. She has other problems to deal with.

Smuggler demands more

Conversations with the smuggler are not going well.

Moises is being moved. He went from the drop house in Phoenix to another one in Las Vegas.

And the price is going up. It started at \$1,500, then halfway through the journey rose to \$2,000. And now the smuggler wants another \$500 before he'll put Moises on a plane to North Carolina.

She talks him down to \$2,200, then hangs up and slips onto the couch, her shoulders trembling, and begins to cry.

Again, her brother Juan agrees to help with the money.

Moises isn't here yet - and Noé runs away.

The argument starts when Reyna orders Chinese takeout. Noé wants her to cook dinner, to satisfy his ideals of his *Mamá's* homemade meals. He skips dinner, staring at the television, his arms crossed in front of him.

Reyna is exhausted. She's been sleeping on the car trips between the homes her company cleans. Between welcoming Noé and negotiating for Moises, she's been staying up late, waking up early.

Sergio notices the boy is gone when he wakes in the middle of the night and finds the door to the boys' room open.

He wakes Reyna, who frantically dons her bathrobe and runs outside to look for him. Their neighborhood isn't dangerous, but it borders old, falling-down houses and a ravine where homeless people live.

She wanders the street, softly calling his name.

"Noé!"

Finally, the boy appears from the gulch behind their home. He's crying, shaking a little, but he comes to her and they sit on the curb.

She holds the boy's head against her, speaking softly to him.

Two nights later, Noé's life changes again.

A sudden reunion

The reunion with Moises, when it finally happens, is sudden.

Sergio wires the money to the smuggler. He has to do it, not Reyna, because the smuggler fears two big wire transfers from one person will tip off *la migra*. In Las Vegas, Moises gets a fake Nogales, Sonora, driver's license that says he's 18 years old so he can fly without the scrutiny airline personnel would give a child. That day, he boards a plane to North Carolina.

He steps off the plane smiling at his mother and is tackled by Noé, who wraps his arms around him and won't let go.

Their problems aren't over - not even close, Reyna says as they leave the airport.

She needs to enroll the boys in school.

She's already worrying about how to pay a doctor to treat Moises' eye - watery and blurry since a nasty encounter with a barbed-wire fence at his grandfather's house.

She's thinking of Noé and how to help him adjust to an America that isn't the luxurious haven he thought it would be.

"But we're a family now," she says, her arms wrapped around her two boys. "We have each other to count on. We don't have very much else, but that's going to have to be enough."

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