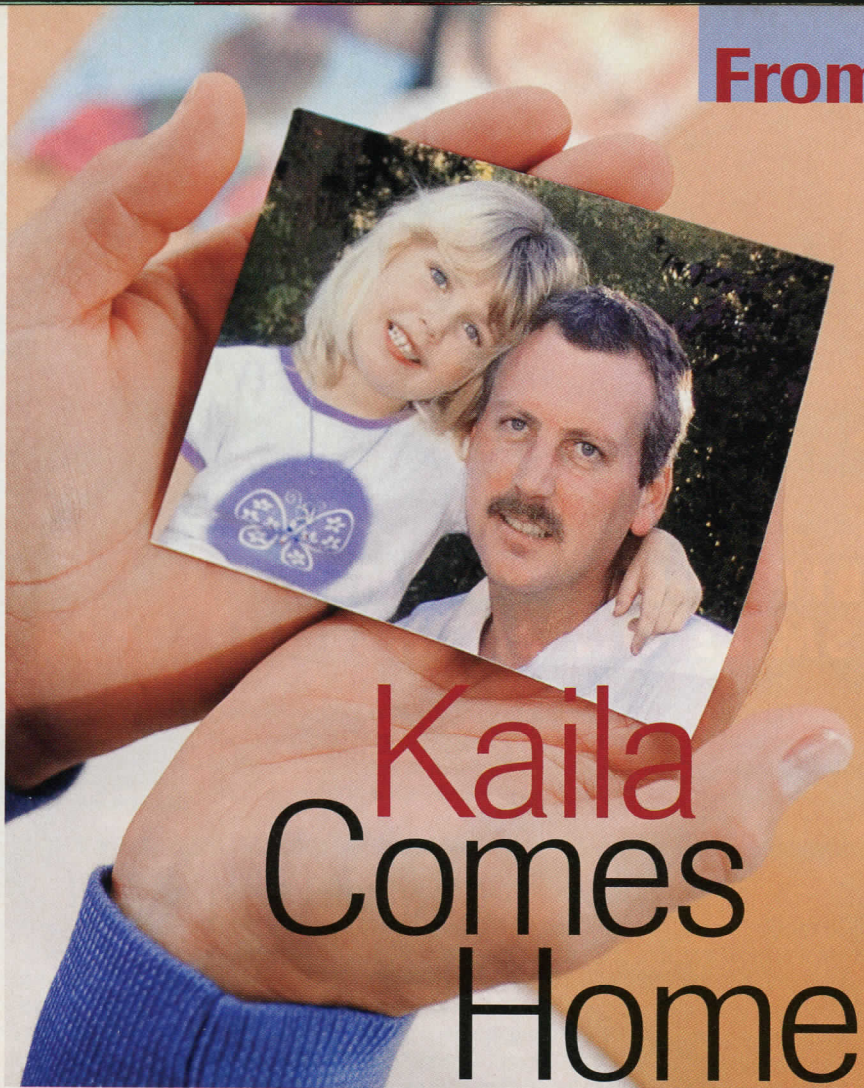


From the Heart

By Anne Cassidy



Kaila Comes Home

How a FAMILY CIRCLE Reader Helped a Father Find His Daughter

June 16, 2003, is a day that Dan Berg will never forget.

It was a sunny Monday in Federal Way, Washington, the Seattle suburb where he lived with his 4-year-old daughter, Kaila. He had spent the morning getting her ready for a visit with her mother, Andrea Leishman. Dan, who had sole custody, had worked out visitation with his ex-wife, but it wasn't always smooth sailing. "She'd find excuses to extend Kaila's visits, and I'd get tired of arguing," Dan says.

This time Kaila was due back at 7 P.M. At least that was the plan. But Andrea did not return at 7 P.M. Or 8 P.M. So Dan drove to his ex-wife's house in Bellevue, fully expecting another argument. When he arrived,

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there was no sign of Andrea or his daughter. Now frantic, he drove to the Bellevue police station to report Kaila missing. The police explained that they couldn't issue a warrant immediately because Washington has a waiting period based on the circumstances of each case. They promised to patrol the streets near Andrea's house, and if they found her, they would check on Kaila. Despondent, Dan drove home and tried not to look at Kaila's toys. "The last thing she played with were Legos," he says. "She built herself a little train." He didn't have the heart to take it apart.

Dan Berg married Andrea Leishman in 1997, and their life together was tumultuous almost from the start. They divorced soon after. Andrea re-

ceived primary custody as part of the divorce settlement. Dan paid child support and visited Kaila often.

At first he thought everything was fine, but he soon began to suspect that Andrea wasn't caring for his daughter properly. That's when he sought full custody. Andrea contested this, but Dan received temporary custody of Kaila in the spring of 2001. After that Andrea could see her only on supervised visits. Dan, a carpenter, found a child-care center near his work and moved to a split-level home down the street from his ex-wife's sister, Britt Strom, and her family. "They wrapped their arms around us and said, 'Let's be a family,'" Dan says. Kaila thrived in this warm environment.

Soon Andrea began to badger Dan for unsupervised visits, and he eventually agreed. He'd live to regret the decision. In 2002 Andrea fled with Kaila to a shelter for battered women, claiming she was abused. She quickly blew her cover, however, when she assaulted an employee and was arrested. Kaila was returned to her dad. On May 3, 2003, he was awarded sole custody.

Dan couldn't help but think about his troubled history with Andrea when Kaila disappeared that awful night on June 16. People had been telling him that he should never have left Andrea alone with Kaila, but he felt sorry for his ex-wife. Now his daughter was gone. The authorities couldn't take immediate action, but he could, so Dan threw himself into search mode. He printed flyers with Kaila's picture and distributed them in malls, restaurants, everywhere. But there was no trace of his girl.

"I knew we would find Kaila. I just didn't know when," says Bellevue detective Elizabeth Faith, who was assigned to the case. After 30 days Detective Faith had a warrant for Andrea's arrest and had notified the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They put Kaila's picture on their Web site, and soon posters of Kaila were rolling out across the country, including a photo in the April 20, 2004, issue of FAMILY CIRCLE.

Once Kaila was listed with the NCMEC, plenty of tips came in, all of

How to Keep Your Children Safe

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, over 2000 children are reported missing every day. While family abductions like the Bergs' are much more common than stranger kidnappings, all parents need to be careful. Here are some of the best ways to keep your kids safe:

Be prepared. Have current pictures of your children on hand. Educate your kids by explaining what to do if they are lost. Tell children to find an employee if they are separated from you in a store. (They can identify employees by their name tags or uniforms.) If they can't find an employee, they should look for a mom with her children.

Break the rules. "Kids need permission to tell adults no, even to make a scene," says Lara Murray, senior program director at the National Center for Victims of Crime. "We teach children to obey adults, but there are times when they shouldn't." These times include when someone is paying too much attention to them, trying to touch them, or even asking them to help find a street address or a lost puppy. Make sure your children know that there is no shame in running away from an uncomfortable situation.

Create safety in numbers. "Never let your children go places alone. If they are traveling with a group, they should stay

with the group. Kids should avoid walking after dusk and taking shortcuts because they tend to be less traveled," says Dave Johnson, chief of the Crimes Against Children Unit of the FBI. Get to know the parents of your kids' friends, school administrators, grocery store cashiers—other eyes who watch your child when you can't. Likewise, keep a list of family or friends your child could call if she can't reach you.

Be vigilant. Limit the interaction your children have with other adults without your supervision. Check a sitter's references and a public caregiver registry if there is one in your area. Pay attention to small signs that your kids are uncomfortable about an incident or a person. Drop in unannounced at day-care centers; volunteer at your child's school.

Ensure online safety. One of the greatest new threats to children is what they encounter in computer chat rooms or while instant-messaging. Kids may be enticed out of the house and into an unsafe situation through

online contact. Make sure the computer is in a public area so you can keep tabs. Set clear guidelines. For example, children may not instant-message people they don't know.

Trust yourself. "Nature has provided every parent with a reliable safety system: Intuition. Use it," advises threat assessment expert Gavin de Becker in his book *Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe* (Dell). If something seems unusual or strange to you, pay attention to it.

If you're divorced: Nearly 80 percent of abductions are by family members, usually noncustodial parents. Pay attention to such red flags as frequent arguments over visitation, your ex-spouse is planning to quit a job, sell a home, obtain a passport or medical or school records. Settle custody disputes as promptly as possible and abide by them. Keep a copy of current custody orders on hand. Document visitation violations or abduction threats and report them to authorities. Communicate with your ex so that frustration doesn't build up. Make sure schools and caregivers know about your custody orders and who can and can't pick up your child.

which were forwarded to Detective Faith. Dan learned not to get his hopes up. That all changed on April 28, 2004. Detective Faith called Dan and said there was a promising lead. She asked him to tell her his dad's nickname for Kaila. "Sticky Icky," Dan said, wondering why in the world she wanted to know. He wouldn't have to wonder long. She called back later that day and asked him if he could be on a plane in a moment's notice.

And so it came to pass that the

nickname grandpa had given Kaila was the key to finding the little girl. An Arizona woman had seen Kaila's picture in FAMILY CIRCLE, thought she recognized the girl, checked Kaila's photo on the Internet and reported her suspicion. Kaila had told the tipster's daughter the unusual nickname given to her by her granddad. When Dan confirmed it, that was all Faith needed to hear. She and her partner flew to Black Canyon City, Arizona, and found mother and daughter living



Authorities distributed posters of 4-year-old Kaila across the country.

in a trailer. Andrea was arrested and authorities took Kaila into custody.

When Dan arrived in Arizona, officers took him to a motel. Kaila was swimming in the pool. After nearly a year apart, Dan couldn't believe he was finally going to see Kaila. When he walked toward the pool, he didn't know what to expect. His heart melted when he saw his girl—a year older, a bit taller, her once waist-long hair unevenly hacked to shoulder length.

"Hey, Daddy, let me show you my new dive," Kaila said as if they'd never been apart. She jumped in and out of the pool a few times, and then, says Dan, his voice happy and bright, "She wanted to show me her new bathing suit. So she got out of the water, did this little twirl and gave me a hug. I was enjoying the heck out of it."

Andrea pleaded guilty to custodial interference. As part of her plea, she can have no contact with Kaila for one year unless her mental health provider believes she has made sufficient progress to allow supervised contact and Kaila's counselor feels it's in the girl's best interest. Andrea was given credit for time served and is on probation. Her lawyer couldn't be reached for comment.

As for Dan and Kaila, they have resumed life together as father and daughter. With her hair newly cut to even out the various lengths, Kaila, now 6, enjoys riding the bicycle Dan bought her when they returned home. She mostly rides it around their garage, Dan says, because she doesn't want daddy out of her sight. Still, given all she's been through, she's adjusted well, he adds. Kaila doesn't ask much about Andrea, but during those moments when she does, Dan tells her, "Mommy had her turn, and now I'm having mine." **FC**