

## Boy gets a life, a home



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Fifteen years ago, Jason Ian James Searing took the stand in a Eugene, Ore., courtroom. Having promised to tell the truth, Searing testified that someone had "hurt me" through sexual abuse.

It was hard to say this. He was, after all, implicating his father, who was giving him "mean looks" from across the courtroom. Jason was 4 years old.

Jason was in the middle of a custody dispute between his mother, Nancy Lea Searing, and his father, Scott Anderson Searing. A physician and several therapists testified that the child showed signs of sexual abuse. Scott Searing has repeatedly denied those allegations.

The judge awarded visitation rights to the father, dismissing the troubling evidence: "Let me tell you, there is no sexual abuse," the judge said in July 1986. Furthermore, the judge threatened to take the child away from the mother if she made further allegations of sexual abuse.

Shortly thereafter, the child was supposed to go on a two-week vacation with his father. A Eugene policeman and a Catholic nun urged Nancy Searing to take the boy and run. On Nov. 1, 1986, Searing left home with a typewriter, some legal papers and some clothes.

For a short time, mother and son lived in a battered-women's shelter. Then they fled to Hawaii, Cuba and Australia. They were fugitives until this year, when Searing contacted Alan Rosenfeld, a Boulder attorney who specializes in child-abduction cases.

Searing said her son wants to attend an American university and play professional baseball. They want to come home.

In a letter dated March 24, 2001, Jason Searing speaks as an adult. "Because of my age, I am now allowed to be my own person. ... And I no longer will have to suffer abuse at the hands of my father," the son wrote. "I suffered severe abuse whenever I went on court-ordered visits with Scott."

Because Nancy Searing had fled with the boy, she faced charges of first-degree custodial interference, parental kidnapping. In June, Rosenfeld asked prosecutors in Eugene to dismiss the custodial-interference charge. They wouldn't. Two weeks ago, Nancy Searing went on trial. She faced up to five years in prison. The trial lasted four days. On Oct. 18, the jury deliberated 35 minutes before proclaiming Nancy Searing not guilty.

"The 35-minute acquittal ought to speak to the fact that the prosecutor had no business taking that case to trial," Rosenfeld said last week. He believes it was the first U.S. attempt to prosecute an abducting parent who had stayed in hiding until her child turned 18. It raises questions about how the judiciary handles such cases.

A 1990 U.S. Justice Department study says as many as 163,200 children are abducted annually by family members hoping to keep those children away from one of their parents. Many of these cases involve allegations of sexual abuse. Almost half of sexual-assault victims younger than 5 are victimized by family members.

Today is Jason Searing's 19th birthday. After 15 years underground, he and his dauntless mother have a life in America.

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