

JAN-27-2005 12:05 PM MAY-ROSENFELD 970 259 7321 P.01

A little luck and a little grace bring the Koplins home

Five years — or half a lifetime, more or less — passed before the girls escaped the loving embrace of adults who didn't believe a word they said.

The three sisters — Allyson, Meredith and Amanda Koplin — spent more than 30 months living underground with their mother, Nancy, after failing to convince Texas authorities that their father had sexually abused them.

When the FBI and Tillamook County sheriff's deputies finally nabbed mother and daughters in Pacific City in 1993, the girls were hustled to the airport under false pretense and flown back to Texas.

They lived in foster homes for nine months. They were dragged by Child Protective Services' workers back to their father's apartment and urged to tell the guy that they loved him.

They were the star witnesses and prize catch in a protracted legal battle that may leave Nancy Graser Koplin in debt for the rest of her life.

Getting depressed? You shouldn't be.



This, believe it or not, is a success story.

When a San Antonio jury terminated Gary Koplin's parental rights last week, it marked one of the first times that a mother who took her children underground has been awarded full custody in court.

Why the Koplins?

"Some amazing luck and grace," said Alan Rosenfeld, the family's Vermont-based attorney.

"I'm not sure Nancy and the girls would have ended up this safe without every one of those pieces of luck."

The Koplins' incredible journey began in the fall of 1990, two days after Nancy and Gary finalized their divorce. Amanda, who was then 4, told her mother that she'd been abused. Her mother filed a police report. Child Protective Services in San Antonio

shrugged and said they couldn't be sure.

Nancy Koplin fled with her daughters to Michigan, where doctors and social workers confirmed the abuse of each of her daughters. When she tried to terminate Gary's parental rights, a Michigan judge ordered her back to Texas.

Instead, Koplin hit the Oregon trail. With the help of a Eugene couple, Jim and Mary Curtis, the Koplins hid out for two years while Gary searched for them on "Hard Copy" and "America's Most Wanted."

When Nancy Koplin was finally arrested on child-kidnapping charges, her daughters were fed back into the Texas "child protection" system.

That's a system, she said, that treats mothers who report sexual abuse as if they're toting some weird agenda. A system that seemed intent to "railroad the children into having a relationship with" their abuser.

"It wasn't the system that saved the children," Koplin said. "The jury in Texas were some of the first people in five years who actually listened to what the children said,

and acted on it. The parents on the jury made the decision to protect my daughters. No one in the system was willing to do that."

The jury was a stroke of luck. In the harrowing world of child-abuse cases, agnosticism — for lack of a better word — often wears the veterans down. When one parent charges the other with abusing their kids, too many social workers, lawyers, judges and opinion writers seek refuge in the idea that the truth is unknowable.

But Texas law allows anyone the right to a jury trial on any issue. After a four-week trial, in which the jury listened to 10 hours of Allyson, Meredith and Amanda testifying on tape, it terminated Gary Koplin's parental rights.

Rosenfeld emerged from the case questioning whether the standard of proof should be lowered in child-abuse cases. There are three legal standards — beyond a reasonable doubt, clear and convincing evidence, and "preponderance" of evidence.

"For termination of parental rights, we had to meet the 'clear and convincing' stan-

dard," Rosenfeld said. "It seems to me ludicrous not to protect the child when there's only a 49.9 percent probability that the child is going to be raped. If a mother would do anything else that had a 50 percent chance of causing the child harm, we'd take the child away and charge child neglect."

After hearing the verdict, Koplin and her daughters flew back to Oregon, landing in Portland Wednesday night. The girls will start school Monday; their mother will look for a marketing job, and the opportunity to begin repaying her debts.

Rosenfeld is also moving on. "We call this an amazing victory, but look what they suffered through to get to this point," he said.

"We should all take hope that these three children have been saved. But that's all. I don't think any other children are safer. As I'm celebrating the joy of freeing these girls, I'm already looking at other cases."

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