

## COMING HOME...

Maria Antonia, barely 2 years old, plays happily and unconcerned as any child her age would at the doorway of her home in El Plantón, a village of Palencia. She is unaware of the suffering, desperation and finally the happiness her family has experienced lately. Little does she know that she has been the central figure of one of those well-known stories involving child kidnapping, evincing the need for a regulating entity and specific legislation in the area of adoptions in Guatemala.

"We were deceived", begins by saying Raúl de Jesús Pineda, the baby's father, when asked about what happened. "Around September 2003, my wife became very ill and a neighbour came to help us accompanied by a married couple. The couple offered us some money and said they would care for our baby girl – six months old at the time - while my wife was in hospital", explains Raúl, the father of 9 children.

Raúl and his wife Petrona believed in the good intentions of the couple and let them take María Antonia under the condition that they would be allowed to see the little girl whenever they wished and that she would come home when her mother had recovered.



María Antonia, barely two years old, is unaware of the events taking place around her.



Little Maria Antonia is her mother's best company and follows her everywhere.

"What a terrible mistake... We only saw the little girl once. They never answered our phone calls and we began to suspect that something had gone wrong. The neighbour who had brought the couple to our home said she knew nothing", comments Raúl.

## The search begins

"I went straight to the law. I reported the case to the Police, then I went to the Court of the Peace and finally the case reached the Public Ministry", recalls María Antonia's father who was beside himself because the case did not move forward and he felt he was not being listened to.

"Unable to read, only my God guided me. I went from one place to another seeking help to keep on fighting", says Raúl. And so he came in contact with an international NGO, whose legal office has received support and assistance from the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, in the area of adoptions.

“We gave legal support and follow up to the judicial decision in the Public Ministry but the problem stemmed from the fact that it was generally believed that the family had “sold” the child. But anybody who had seen how desperate the little girl’s father was on his regular visits to the capital city to enquire about his daughter knew that this was not the case”, recalls Dinora Echeverría, the lawyer from the NGO.

Through the support and intervention of this non-governmental organisation, the child was finally found. “Police first went to the house of the neighbour who knew the couple who had María Antonia, and the little girl was found in May 2004. The child was placed in a shelter until the court heard the parties involved and determined the case”, indicated Dinora Echeverría.



María Antonia plays with her siblings after her absence of many months.

In favour of the little girl’s parents was the fact that although the couple wanted to keep the child they had not bothered to follow the necessary legal procedures and obtain all pertinent documents, being therefore unable to prove that the little girl was theirs.

“We never signed anything because we did not want to give our little girl away”, says Raúl. Nevertheless, the couple visited El Plantón on three occasions to try to persuade Raúl and Petrona to sign some papers while María Antonia was in the shelter and audiences were being held at the court. “One may not be knowledgeable of many things but is not so ignorant. Besides, we had been warned that the family would probably insist on keeping the little girl. When they came for the third time to ask us to sign the papers, our only option was to use profane language and throw them out” recalls Petrona.

August 9 was the happiest day for these parents –“it was like watching María Antonia being born again” says her mother - as the court had decided to return the little girl to her biological parents. “It was wonderful for the whole the family to come together again. Poverty is not reason enough to bring parents to decide not to keep their children... it certainly is more difficult to bring them up but we are prepared to do anything for their sake”, declares Raúl.

In the opinion of Dinora Echeverría, the end of this story was not so sweet, stressing that, “The child was returned to her parents but no process was initiated against the couple that took the little girl away. There is still much to be done in the area of adoptions but through the efforts of national and international entities, like UNICEF, we are moving forward”.

Text: Maite Garmendia  
Photos: Elena Prieto

\*\*\*\*\*

**Fondo de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Infancia - UNICEF**  
Edificio Edyma Plaza, Nivel 2  
13 Calle 8-44, Zona 10  
Guatemala City, Guatemala

Teléfono (502) 2333 63 73  
Fax (502) 2363 40 16  
(502) 2333 63 17

[www.unicef.org/guatemala](http://www.unicef.org/guatemala)