

Grandmothers, Elian Reunited

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Body

Elian Gonzalez was finally reunited with his **grandmothers** Wednesday at a "neutral site" that had to be arranged by the U.S. government because of the personal and political passions swirling around the 6-year-old **Cuban** boy.

Elian was driven to a nun's house in **Miami** Beach to see his **grandmothers**, who had flown in from Washington. The visit lasted about an hour and a half.

"It took him a little while to warm up, but after a little bit he became very animated," said Sister Peggy Albert, one of the nuns who monitored the **reunion**.

The **grandmothers** and Elian played with an Etch-A-Sketch and stuffed animals, and the women showed him a photo album and letters from his classmates in Cuba, Albert said.

"They just came to him and they hugged him and they sat down at a table and they were seeing an album of pictures," said **Elian's** cousin Marisleysis Gonzalez, who brought Elian to the room where he met with his **grandmothers**.

The **grandmothers** did not comment as they left the **meeting** and were driven away to a helicopter. They planned to return to Washington.

The **reunion** was held at the home of Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, 70, president of Barry University, who has long been involved with helping immigrants.

O'Laughlin, who also monitored the **reunion** while **relatives** waited in the next room, said that when Elian entered, the **grandmothers** picked him up and were shaking as they hugged him and kissed him. They broke down crying after Elian walked out of the room, the nun said.

Elian's father, in a letter printed in the Communist Party newspaper Granma, asked to be included in the **reunion** by telephone. O'Laughlin said a nun took a cell phone from Mariela Quintana, the paternal **grandmother**, after it rang.

Mrs. Quintana and Raquel Rodriguez had not seen their grandson since before he left Cuba for the United States with his mother, who died along with 10 other people when their boat capsized. Elian was found clinging to an inner tube off the Florida coast on Nov. 25.

The **grandmothers** came to the United States last week to appeal to the American people and Congress to send the boy back to his father in Cuba. **Elian's relatives** in **Miami** are fighting a U.S. government **order** sending him back.

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The grandmothers also flew to Miami on Monday but left without seeing Elian. The Miami relatives insisted that any reunion take place at their home in the Little Havana neighborhood, but the grandmothers said they were uncomfortable going there. Anti-Castro Cuban immigrants have been holding protests around the home.

After long negotiations, the Justice Department ordered Elian's relatives to bring him to the nun's house. The agency said it had the authority to do so under the arrangement letting the boy stay in this country pending further immigration proceedings.

As the grandmothers drove up to the house, a few people tossed flowers at their car. About 200 demonstrators were waiting outside the house; some cheered and others booed as the grandmothers passed.

O'Laughlin said both sides were so nervous and mistrustful about the meeting that she had to show them there was no chance Elian could be taken away.

O'Laughlin said she was "showing that windows couldn't be opened, that doors couldn't be opened, that there weren't no disappearing trap doors." When the grandmothers arrived, they trembled with fear, the nun said.

"There was pain on both sides, there was hurt on both sides," O'Laughlin said. "The greatest element, however, was that of fear."

Spencer Eig, lead attorney for the Miami family, said Elian's great-uncles wanted to meet with the grandmothers, but the women refused.

Later, as Elian returned to his relatives home in Miami, a crowd waiting outside roared with approval. Elian's great-uncle Delfin Gonzalez faced the crowd while holding a crucifix above his head.

"Tomorrow they're going to make me an American citizen," Elian said in an interview broadcast over the Spanish-language Radio Mambi while driving back to his relatives' home.

On Capitol Hill, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott indicated he has no solid plans for handling legislation to give Elian U.S. citizenship. That would remove the boy from the jurisdiction of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the agency that ordered him back to Cuba.

"There are a lot of extenuating circumstances," Lott said. "Obviously it could come up next week. But there are a lot of people looking at this issue and there may be developments between now and then."

President Clinton supported the grandmothers' cause, hinting he might veto the citizenship legislation if it passes. And senators seeking Elian's return to Cuba suggested they might use delaying tactics to keep the Senate from debating the measure.

The grandmothers met with several members of Congress this week and asked them not to pass such a bill. One of their supporters in the Senate, Connecticut Democrat Christopher Dodd, said it was "pathetic" that Congress would get involved in the life of a 6-year-old.

"We can have good families in bad countries," he said. "This is a good family."

While the reunion was going on in Miami Beach, hundreds of farmers gathered in an auditorium at the Revolutionary Armed Forces headquarters in Havana in the latest in a series of government-organized protests calling for the child's return to his homeland.

Fidel Castro's government has scheduled a much larger demonstration on Friday, the anniversary of the birth of Cuban independence hero Jose Marti.

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The Justice Department had said the grandmothers would see Elian privately, with the boy's Florida relatives nearby in the house. Elian's father, in a letter printed in the Communist Party newspaper Granma, asked to be included in the reunion by telephone.

The grandmothers had also flown to Miami on Monday but left town without seeing Elian. The Miami relatives insisted that any reunion take place at their home in the Little Havana neighborhood, but the grandmothers said they were uncomfortable going there. Anti-Castro Cuban immigrants have been holding protests around the home.

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The reunion was held at the home of Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, president of Barry University. O'Laughlin, 70, has a history of helping immigrants and had said she would serve as "welcomer" and "hugger."

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Despite no prospect of taking Elian with them, his grandmothers were still looking forward to the visit.

"I don't know if I'll cry or if I'll laugh," Mrs. Rodriguez, Elian's maternal grandmother, told CNN on Tuesday.

The boy's Miami relatives say Elian wants to stay in the United States. The grandmothers have said Elian has told them by telephone that he wants to return to Cuba.

Spencer Eig, lead attorney for the Miami family, said Elian's great-uncles wanted to meet with the grandmothers at O'Laughlin's house, but the women refused.

The grandmothers of 6-year-old Elian Gonzalez are ready to head to Florida for a government-ordered session with the Cuban boy while political maneuvering intensifies over legislation to make him a U.S. citizen.

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That same snowstorm also was making it unclear exactly when the grandmothers would be able to leave for Miami, since Washington-area airports were mostly shut down Tuesday. The grandmothers and their representatives said they would leave for Miami today at the first opportunity.

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Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., said the grandmothers told them Elián's mother was on the ill-fated boat not to flee Castro's oppression but because of pressure from her boyfriend.

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They still looked forward to the visit.

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Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, said today the grandmothers recalled in their meeting with lawmakers that when Elian was rescued from the Atlantic on Nov. 25, "he was able to give his father's name and telephone number."

One of the father's relatives, Jackson Lee said on ABC's "Good Morning America," called another relative "and said go to the hospital and take care of him overnight and make sure he gets back home."

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The grandmothers of Elian Gonzalez arrived Wednesday for the government-ordered meeting with the 6-year-old Cuban boy they have not seen in more than two months.

Mariela Quintana and Raquel Rodriguez arrived at Opa-locka Airport just after 3 p.m.

They were expected to be taken by helicopter to the meeting at the Miami Beach home of Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, president of Barry University. Her home was chosen as a neutral site in the tug of war between the boy's Cuban and Cuban-American relatives.

In Washington, meanwhile, political maneuvering intensified over legislation to make the little shipwreck survivor, whose mother died in the attempt to get from Cuba to Florida, a U.S. citizen.

The two women made an impassioned appeal to Congress on Tuesday not to pass such a bill, saying Elian was a Cuban citizen and belonged with his father and them in Cuba.

"It's our right to see our grandson and take him back home," Mrs. Quintana, the child's paternal grandmother, said during a visit to Capitol Hill.

They won't be able to do that when they see Elian late this afternoon in Miami Beach, however. The meeting was to be just a visit, set up the Immigration and Naturalization Service after efforts by the grandmothers to see their grandson in Miami on Monday fell through.

Grandmothers, Elian Reunited

Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque demanded during a visit to Moscow today that the boy be returned, accusing the United States of violating his human rights. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov also has endorsed the idea of returning the boy.

Despite no prospect of taking Elian with them, his Cuban grandmothers still looked forward to the visit.

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Rep. Sheila, 8th graf, a0664

The grandmothers of Elian Gonzalez arrived Wednesday for the government-ordered meeting with the 6-year-old Cuban boy they have not seen in more than two months.

Mariela Quintana and Raquel Rodriguez arrived at Opa-locka Airport just after 3 p.m.

They were expected to be taken by helicopter to the meeting at the Miami Beach home of Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, president of Barry University. Her home was chosen as a neutral site in the tug-of-war between the boy's Cuban and Cuban-American relatives.

In Washington, meanwhile, political maneuvering intensified over legislation to make the little shipwreck survivor, whose mother died in the attempt to get from Cuba to Florida, a U.S. citizen.

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"I don't know if I'll cry or if I'll laugh" when seeing Elian for the first time in more than two months, Mrs. Rodriguez, Elian's maternal grandmother, told CNN Tuesday after the INS ruling.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, said today the grandmothers recalled in their meeting with lawmakers that when Elian was rescued from the Atlantic on Nov. 25, "he was able to give his father's name and telephone number."

One of the father's relatives, Jackson Lee said on ABC's "Good Morning America," called another relative "and said go to the hospital and take care of him overnight and make sure he gets back home."

President Clinton supported the grandmothers' cause, hinting he might veto the citizenship legislation if it passes. And those in the Senate seeking Elian's repatriation to Cuba suggested they might use delaying tactics, including a filibuster, to keep the Senate from debating the measure.

"The idea that the Senate and the House of Representatives is going to determine the fate of a 6-year-old is pathetic," said Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn.

Grandmothers, Elian Reunited

Elián belongs with his father and grandmothers, Dodd said. "We can have good families in bad countries," he said after a meeting with the grandmothers. "This is a good family."

The snowstorm that gripped Washington, as well as much of the Atlantic seaboard, and the rising combativeness of those opposing the citizenship bill prompted Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., to put off trying to bring the measure up until next week.

Lott earlier had said it could come up as early as today.

The INS, which is part of the Justice Department, announced late Tuesday that Elián's Florida family had agreed to today's visit. Earlier in the day the INS had said it had the authority to order the family to agree to the meeting under the arrangement by which the boy has been allowed to stay in this country pending further immigration proceedings.

"The meeting will take place at the time and site selected by the Immigration Service," Justice spokeswoman Carole Florman said.

Florman said the government had reassured the relatives that today's meeting at the Miami Beach home of the president of a Dominican college would be just a visit and would not result in Elián's being taken back to Cuba.

The grandmothers will see Elián privately, but the boy's Florida relatives will be nearby in the house at the time, Florman said.

In Miami, the lead attorney for Elián's relatives, Spencer Eig, said, "Elián has stated that he's a little bit afraid to go all by himself because he's afraid they might be forced to take him back to Cuba."

He said today's visit was expected to last two hours and called the INS "heavy handed" in its dealings.

The INS has ruled that the boy should be returned to his father in Cuba. Elián's Florida relatives have challenged the order in federal court.

The boy was found clinging to a life preserver in the Atlantic on Thanksgiving Day after his mother and 10 others died when their boat sank en route from Cuba to the United States. His parents were divorced.

Versions of the citizenship bill are before both the House and the Senate. Backers say the boy would have a better life in the United States than in communist Cuba.

The measure, drafted by members of the Florida congressional delegation, would confer U.S. citizenship on Elián, thus removing the INS jurisdiction from the case.

Elián Gonzalez and his grandmothers arrived for a long-awaited reunion this afternoon at a "neutral site" arranged by the U.S. government.

The 6-year-old Cuban boy was driven to a nun's house in Miami Beach to see his grandmothers, who had flown in from Washington and were brought to the home in a helicopter.

The grandmothers came to the United States last week to appeal directly to the American people and Congress to send the boy back to his father in Cuba. Elián's relatives in Miami want him to stay and are fighting a U.S. government order sending him back.

The grandmothers were to see Elián privately, with the boy's Florida relatives nearby in the house. Justice Department spokeswoman Carole Florman said the women would not be allowed to take the boy home with them afterward.

A few people tossed flowers at the car that took the women from the helicopter to the house. Some demonstrators outside the home cheered and others booed as the grandmothers were driven by.

Grandmothers, Elian Reunited

The grandmothers had also flown to Miami on Monday but left town without seeing the boy. They said they were uncomfortable going to the house in Little Havana where the relatives have been caring for the boy. Several emotional anti-Castro protests have been held in the neighborhood.

Mariela Quintana and Raquel Rodriguez had not seen their grandson since before he left Cuba for the United States with his mother, who died in the attempt along with 10 other people. Elian was found clinging to an inner tube off the Florida coast on Nov. 25.

The reunion was being held at the home of Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, president of Barry University. O'Laughlin, 70, has a history of helping immigrants and had said she would serve as "welcomer" and "hugger."

On Capitol Hill today, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott indicated he has no solid plans for handling legislation next week to give Elian U.S. citizenship, which would remove the boy from INS jurisdiction.

"There are a lot of extenuating circumstances," he said. "Obviously it could come up next week. But there are a lot of people looking at this issue and there may be developments between now and then."

Lott said he believes the appropriate way to determine the boy's future is through court action, which citizenship would allow, but said he would listen to senators who don't want the issue handled by Congress.

To take effect, the measure would have to pass both houses and be signed by President Clinton, who has said he would not rule out a veto.

The two women made an impassioned appeal to Congress on Tuesday not to pass such a bill, saying Elian was a Cuban citizen and belonged with his father and them in Cuba.

"It's our right to see our grandson and take him back home," said Mrs. Quintana, the child's paternal grandmother.

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Despite no prospect of taking Elian with them, his grandmothers were still looking forward to the visit.

"I don't know if I'll cry or if I'll laugh," Mrs. Rodriguez, Elian's maternal grandmother, told CNN on Tuesday.

The lead attorney for Elian's relatives, Spencer Eig, said today's visit was expected to last two hours.

"Elian has stated that he's a little bit afraid to go all by himself because he's afraid they might be forced to take him back to Cuba," Eig said.

The grandmothers have said Elian has told them by telephone that he wants to return to Cuba.

Elian Gonzalez and his grandmothers arrived Wednesday at a "neutral site" for a reunion that had to be arranged by the U.S. government because of the personal and political passions swirling around the 6-year-old Cuban boy.

Elian was driven to a nun's house in Miami Beach to see his grandmothers, who had flown in from Washington and were then brought to the home in a helicopter.

The grandmothers came to the United States last week to appeal directly to the American people and Congress to send the boy back to his father in Cuba. Elian's relatives in Miami want him to stay and are fighting a U.S. government order sending him back.

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To take effect, the measure would have to pass both houses and be signed by President Clinton, who has not ruled out a veto.

The two grandmothers met with several members of Congress this week and asked them not to pass such a bill.

"It's our right to see our grandson and take him back home," said Mrs. Quintana, the child's paternal grandmother.

Despite no prospect of taking Elian with them, his grandmothers were still looking forward to the visit.

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The grandmothers have said Elian has told them by telephone that he wants to return to Cuba.

Elian Gonzalez's father asked to be included by telephone in the boy's Wednesday meeting with his grandmothers in Miami and asked that the child's great-uncle not be permitted in the gathering.

The letter from Juan Miguel Gonzalez and Elian's two grandfathers and his great-grandmother was printed in Wednesday's edition of the Communist Party daily Granma.

They said that after the meeting, they would like Elian's grandmothers, Mariela Quintana and Raquel Rodriguez, to return to Washington for more meetings with lawmakers in their fight to prevent Congress from giving Elian U.S. citizenship against his father's will.

In the letter, Elian's Cuban relatives asked that the grandmothers bring a cellular phone to their two-hour meeting with the boy and asked that the gathering be extended for a third hour with the relatives in Cuba participating by telephone.

"We want to talk to the boy there when he is entirely free with you," the letter said.

It also asked that the boy's Miami relatives, including Elian's great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez, not be allowed in the meeting and that there be no media access.

Grandmothers, Elian Reunited

The letter said it was "unfortunate" that the media and the Cuban exile community already knew where the meeting was being held and begged that there be no "cameras, protests or circus" outside.

The relatives in Elian's hometown of Cardenas, about a two-hour drive east of Havana, said it was fine with them if the grandmothers met with other relatives in Miami who reportedly support returning Elian to his father in Cuba.

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The 11/2-hour meeting ended Wednesday night and it wasn't clear whether the boy had spoken with his family in Cuba.

The letter also asked that the boy's Miami relatives, including Elian's great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez, not be allowed in the meeting and that there be no media access.

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Meanwhile, hundreds of farmers gathered in an auditorium at the Revolutionary Armed Forces headquarters in Havana in the latest in a series of government-organized protests calling for the child's return to his homeland.

Wearing straw hats and waving paper red, white and blue Cuban flags, the farmers praised Fidel Castro's government and called for "our Elian" to be reunited with his father on the communist island.

The Castro government has scheduled a much larger demonstration on Friday, the anniversary of the birth of Cuban independence hero Jose Marti.

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"We want to talk to the boy there when he is entirely free with you," the letter said.

After the 11/2-hour meeting, the nun who hosted it said one of the grandmothers had a phone with her a violation of the rules. The phone was taken away after it rang during the gathering, said Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin. It wasn't clear who was calling.

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