

PUBLIC LIVES;

Standing Between Elian's Two Families - Correction Appended

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 **Correction Appended**

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Length: 901 words

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By JOYCE WADLER

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Body

SINCE being separated from his son five months ago, Juan Miguel Gonzalez has been judged and analyzed by people who have never met him, so it might be instructive to see what a professional who spent two hours in a room with him has to say.

The psychologist, Dr. Lourdes Rigual-Lynch, of the Children's Hospital at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, met with Mr. Gonzalez, his wife and their infant son in Washington, D.C., this past Sunday, but not to assess Mr. Gonzalez or to decide whether his son, Elian, should be returned to him. Dr. Rigual-Lynch was part of a three-person team sent by the Immigration and Naturalization Service to help expedite the boy's return.

Still, one can't help forming an opinion and this week, between trips to Washington and Miami, Dr. Rigual-Lynch said she and her team, on meeting Mr. Gonzalez and his wife, were "very pleasantly surprised."

Play shrink with the shrink -- who, we warn you, does not give a lot of herself away -- and ask her: What do you mean, "pleasantly surprised?"

"We did not know what to expect," Dr. Rigual-Lynch says. "You get nonverbal cues. The father had his new baby on his lap, a cute baby, really cute, 7 months old. He seemed very happy, there was age-appropriate behavior. We felt both the father and stepmother were very open, very caring. They expressed a lot of emotion. Even when talking about the natural mother's death, their eyes welled with tears. He expressed how he feels his son is suffering. It was very emotional. I felt it was genuine."

Elian Gonzalez was found floating in an inner tube in the Atlantic on Thanksgiving Day last year, after an attempted crossing from Cuba in which his mother and 10 other people drowned. Since then, the 6-year-old boy has been caught in a personal and international tug of war, with his great-uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez -- who is his father's uncle - - and many in the Cuban-American community demanding that he remain in the United States.

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When the courts decided Elian should be returned to Cuba, Dr. Rigual-Lynch, 49, who was raised in Puerto Rico, was brought into the case.

"She's a highly respected bilingual Ph.D. psychologist, who has enormous sensitivity to the needs of children in extremely difficult circumstances, the homeless, the abused," said Dr. Irwin Redlener of Montefiore, who put together the team. "She goes into the most desperate situations and puts together a plan."

YESTERDAY, as Elian's Miami family stalled his return, Dr. Rigual-Lynch was in the center of things, standing by to accompany Elian on the plane that was to bring him to his father in Washington.

Between trips, Dr. Rigual-Lynch discussed the case at her Upper East Side office. The impression she gives is of a hard-working and organized woman, who prefers to keep her private life private. The office is filled with the toys she needs for her work, but there are no family pictures. Dr. Rigual-Lynch's classic brown pumps match her classic brown pantsuit; her pale blue eyeshadow matches her pale blue sweater -- none of which portends well for rambling and uncharted discourse.

Discussion of Dr. Rigual-Lynch's own family offers just a bit more than one might offer on a questionnaire.

Her father, Luis Rigual, was a civil engineer as well as a well-known sports commentator; her mother is an executive secretary. Lourdes Rigual was educated in the United States, at Marymount College and at Adelphi University. College work with an autistic child confirmed an interest in child psychology. She is married to Dr. Arthur A. Lynch, the director of mental health services for the city's Department of Correction. There is a daughter, Megan, 16.

There is also, it turns out, a loss in her own family after Dr. Rigual-Lynch was grown -- her 25-year-old brother, who was also a sportscaster, died. She will not discuss the circumstances. It is too painful.

She can, however, discuss some of what she has been told of the boy in the country's most famous custody case.

Elian's mother had a half-dozen miscarriages before Elian was born. Elian was "2 or 3" when his parents' marriage broke up. He spent weekdays living in his father's home, which was close to his school, and he spent weekends with his mother. The Gonzalez family, even after the divorce, was close.

"The maternal and paternal grandparents all came to the father's house in Cuba," Dr. Rigual-Lynch says. "The natural mother and father continued to have a good relationship, even the natural mother and the stepmother knew each other. That's unusual and it was good for Elian; he didn't have that conflict."

Her visit with Elian's great-uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez, this past Monday was difficult. The elder Gonzalez "stalled" his meeting for several hours and it did not appear to Dr. Rigual-Lynch that Mr. Gonzalez understood that the decision to return Elian had been made.

"He does love the boy," Dr. Rigual-Lynch says. "But I think he is a man who has too many other concerns with the community, so that perhaps he cannot decide for himself what to do."

"As far as we can determine, this was a close family. Lazaro's family had visited Cuba two years ago, they used to speak on the phone. When the mother disappeared they were calling each other, they were all worried. In many custody cases, you deal with far more complicated issues. We just don't have the extra issue of political pressure."

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Correction

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An article on Friday about mental health experts who met with the **family** of Elian Gonzalez misstated the given name of his stepmother. (Similar errors occurred in articles on Jan. 15, March 29 and April 7, 8 and 9.) She is Nersy Carmenate Castillo, not Nercy or Nelsy.

Correction-Date: April 17, 2000, Monday

Graphic

Photo: Dr. Lourdes Rigual-Lynch is trying to expedite the return of Elian Gonzalez to Cuba. (Librado Romero/The New York Times)

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