



Mother of Iraq hostage breaks silence

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BY DEAN BAKER, Columbian staff writer

BRUSH PRAIRIE - Jackie Stewart says she can no longer simply wait patiently while the government tries to free her 24-year-old son, who was kidnapped by Iraqi bandits along with four other civilian security contractors nine months ago in Iraq.

She doesn't know if her 24-year-old son, Joshua Munns, is dead or alive. But she is breaking her silence.

"They (the FBI and U.S. State Department) have been telling us for a long time that we should be quiet, not go to the media, because it raises the value of their life," she said. "Well, we kinda want to raise the value of their lives."

FBI agent Dani Geissinger-Rodarte in Seattle said she is working with Stewart, but has no specific information on how the search is going in Iraq. "We have weird policies that nobody can talk to the media except our media contact even if we know what's going on," she said in an interview. But neither FBI nor State Department spokesmen returned a reporter's repeated telephone calls.

Family members are raising money to give to their sons and husbands when they return, or to bribe Iraqis for information.

"I'd hate to have Josh go through all this, and then come home and be broke," said Stewart, 44, a Brush Prairie truck driver who spends 12 hours a day delivering plumbing supplies throughout the Vancouver-Portland area. She said the company her son worked for in Iraq apparently has \$300,000 insurance on each of the men, payable if they are freed after being held for more than a year. But the company, Crescent Security Group, based in Kuwait, has made no commitment to continue to pay the men the \$7,000 a month they were making when they were captured, Stewart said.

Munns, of Redding, Calif., is a former Marine who served 18 months in Iraq. He was in a sniper platoon in the assault on Fallujah in 2004. When kidnapped, he was a civilian contractor in a lead vehicle running supplies, hoping to raise money so he and his fiancée, Jackie Shaw, could buy and remodel a house in Redding. Shaw didn't return a reporter's calls, but Stewart said

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UPDATE

Previously: Joshua Munns, 24, son of Jackie Stewart of Brush Prairie, was one of five contractors kidnapped Nov. 16. They were taken hostage near the southern Iraq city of Basra.

What's new: Stewart, her ex-husband and the other hostages' families are complaining the government isn't sharing information with them and isn't doing enough to free the hostages.

What's next: Having raised \$150,000, some hostages' families are pushing for more intense government action at www.save5.net. Stewart can be reached at 360-609-4600 and is selling T-shirts for \$15 each.

The other hostages are John Roy Young, 44, of Kansas City, Mo.; Jonathan Cote, 24, of Buffalo, N.Y.; Paul Johnson Reuben, 40, of Buffalo, Minn., and Bert Nussbaumer, 25, an Austrian citizen."



the couple's house deal has failed.

Munns and the other four men were abducted from a fake Iraqi checkpoint on Nov. 16, 2006. It was a raid by some 30 or 40 armed men as the convoy headed toward Tallil Air Base, 12 miles southwest of the city of An Nasiriyah. Those who escaped the kidnapping said some of the Iraqi raiders were former employees of Crescent Security.

"It looks like it was an inside job," said Stewart.

No one knows where the men are, or if they are still alive.

'Pretty tough cookies'

Stewart sat on a backyard table next to the two-room house on five rural acres she rents for herself, her dogs, cats and horses between Brush Prairie and Hockinson. She popped a beer and told her story while her horses - Pretty Boy and Legs - ambled around.

Stewart freely admitted she was a poor mother for Munns when he was a child. She was 22 years old when she left the 2-year-old boy in his dad's care.

"I was never married," she said. "I was a terrible single mother." Yet, her maternal instincts are up now, she said, and she is on good terms with Munns' father and stepmother, Mark and Crista Munns of Redding. And she's pushing to get her son back.

"He's got himself in a pickle, that's for sure," said Mark Munns, a retired United Parcel Service driver, from his home in Redding. "You can't get a straight answer from anybody. But Josh is a smart kid; sometimes too smart for his own good. But he is with some of those guys who were in the 82nd Airborne, and they're pretty tough cookies. If anyone can survive, they can."

"It seems like we are fighting the government instead of working with them," Mark Munns said.

Stewart said her son couldn't stand the mundane work of installing swimming pools in Redding after the excitement of war. He was about to re-enlist in the Marines when Crescent made its offer, she said.

Stewart's mother, Carolyn Hanson, 65, of Vancouver, said she is angry that Munns hasn't been found, that he ever went to Iraq, that his family members didn't talk him out of a military career.

Hanson, a retired bookkeeper, said the U.S. government doesn't take his capture as seriously as it takes kidnapping of active duty military. All the civilian contractors were military veterans and deserve equal consideration, she said.

From her home in Kansas City, Mo., Sharon DeBrabander, the mother of hostage John Roy Young, also complained. "We never get anything," she said, shortly after taking part in the weekly Monday morning conference call that State Department Spokeswoman Jenny Foo holds with family members.

"Very nice lady, but she doesn't tell us anything," DeBrabander said. "She doesn't know anything. It kinda helps the families. We have got absolutely zilch. You just can't imagine what that is like."

Joshua Munns, among five men kidnapped in Iraq.



Jackie Stewart of Brush Prairie talks about her son, Joshua Munns, who was taken hostage in Iraq on Nov. 16, 2006. (JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian)

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Sick and disoriented from worry, DeBrabander has endorsed an effort by Mark Koscielski, a Minneapolis gun-shop owner, who has raised about \$150,000 which he claims he will use for ransom in Iraq. He hasn't been able to get permission to travel to Iraq, however, she said.

Stewart said she doesn't endorse Koscielski's effort, although DeBrabander and the families of hostages Paul Reuben and Jonathan Cote back him.

Earlier interview

Washington Post reporter Steve Fainaru interviewed Munns in Iraq two weeks before the kidnapping.

In his articles, Fainaru described Munns as tall and lanky, "with an air of military discipline and close-cropped brown hair that fluffs into an Afro when he doesn't cut it."

The Post reporter said Munns has a tattoo on his left forearm with the words: "The unwanted, doing the unforgivable, for the ungrateful." That's the motto of his Marine platoon.

The captured men last were seen on a videotape on Jan. 3. A statement on the tape said "The National Islamic Resistance in Iraq: The Farqan (Quran) Brigade takes responsibility for the kidnapping in Safwan, Basra."

On the tape, Munns said:

"I joined the Marine Corps in 2001, and I got out in 2005. After I got out of the Marine Corps, I went to work in the construction business, building swimming pools. After that, in July of 2006, I started working for Crescent Security out of Kuwait, and I don't know how long I've been here doing this, but today is Dec. 21, 2006."

Since then: public silence.

FBI arrives

Three FBI agents came to Brush Prairie to see Stewart a week after her son disappeared. They told her they'd do all they can, but gave no details.

Since then, she said she is frequently in touch with Geissinger-Rodarte, the FBI agent, and she is kind, but has no information.

Growing impatient and desperate, the families sought out former hostage Roy Hallums, 59, of Memphis, Tenn. He was a hostage in Iraq for 10 months starting Nov. 1, 2004. He agreed to talk with the families on a conference call.

"He was very informative, and I could hear a little bit of relief from the families," Stewart said.

Those in on the call aside from Stewart were an FBI agent, whose name no one remembers; Cote's mom and dad, Francis and Nancy Cote; Jennifer Reuben, hostage Reuben's sister-in-law and Carrie Reuben, his wife; DeBrabander; and Mark and Crista Munns.

"The group that held me wanted money," Hallums said later in an interview with The Columbian. "Pleading with them won't do any good. These groups make political demands. They say they want all troops out of Iraq, and they know that can't happen. But they just say that for public consumption in Iraq. What they really want is money."

Hallums said his ex-wife and daughter began a public campaign about three months after he was taken hostage, and he believes that spurred the government to win his eventual release.

He said the families should seek FBI help, but also should "do what feels right." He said they shouldn't say anything controversial about the men.

They are doing all they can, Stewart said.

"Francis Cote (hostage Jonathan Cote's father) is doing fliers and getting a cell phone set up over there with someone who speaks Arabic," she said. "We'd like to be able to offer money. Not necessarily negotiating with terrorists, because we are not allowed to do that," she said. "Just looking for leads."

Why not let the government proceed?

The families have come to believe the government's priorities are wrong, giving attention and money to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, for example, instead of finding Americans captured in Iraq.

"There is a hostage working group in Baghdad comprised of FBI, CIA, members of the military and they go out and listen to see if anyone is speaking of held Americans. There are a lot of hostage Americans - we believe at least 20. The different branches of the government do not share information with each other, " Stewart said.

She said the families just are trying to support each other and find any possible way to help in the search.

So far, there's been nothing but frustration, Stewart said. But she intends to keep trying.

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