

AFTER ESCAPE, BURNHAM SNEAKS BACK

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ROSE HILL, Kansas – Disguised in a long blond wig, former hostage Gracia Burnham and her three children secretly returned to the Philippines where the family once served as missionaries.

That visit during the recent Christmas school break gave the family a "good dose of closure," Burnham said in an interview at her home.

"We didn't tell anyone here in America that we were going, and we didn't tell anyone in the Philippines that we were coming," she said. "And I figured, if we could sneak in there as a family, we could be normal -- and that is exactly what happened."

It was her second trip to the Philippines since the Abu Sayyaf kidnapped 20 people from southwestern Palawan province in 2001. Among those abducted were missionary couple Martin and Gracia Burnham and Guillermo Sobero, of Corona, Calif.

Most the hostages later escaped or were rescued or ransomed. Sobero and two Filipino workers were beheaded in captivity. The Burnhams' 377-day ordeal ended with a bloody army rescue on June 7, 2002, that left Martin Burnham and Philippine nurse Ediborah Yap dead.

Gracia Burnham returned to Manila last July to testify against her abductors, but she still longed to return to the rural provinces -- without the bulletproof vests and cars, the bodyguards, the FBI agents and the media.

Her three children -- Jeff, Mindy and Zach -- had begged her to return to the home in the Philippines where the family had lived before the children were whisked away to safety after their parents' kidnapping. So on their last visit, the family visited the province where they had lived.

They visited with old friends, neighbors and co-workers and went to their old house, where they had a meal.

"They were just so happy to be in the old house," Burnham said of her three children. "They were so happy to be with their friends, and they climbed mountains and spent the nights sleeping outside -- you know, it's the tropics. They would sleep out on the trampoline with their friends. I didn't see sadness in them at all. I saw a lot of joy."

When it was time to return to Kansas, the children were ready, she said.

Since their return, Burnham said, her children "seem much more settled."

"They used to say things like, 'Mom, do you remember when we were really making a difference in the world?' We could see every day how we were making a difference because there is poverty all around you -- and here in America nobody needs anything," she said.

For now, the family is trying to move on from the kidnapping ordeal.

Jeffrey, 18, graduates from high school and plans to study aviation at a Virginia university. Mindy, 15, is active in a community theater group that is putting on a presentation of "Fiddler on the Roof." Zach, 14, will move from middle school to high school.

Since the kidnappings, the family members more freely discuss their feelings, Burnham said. When Jeff leaves each morning for school, she said, he still usually tells her: "If I never see you again, I want you to know I love you."