

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention



YOU'RE NOT ALONE

THE JOURNEY
FROM ABDUCTION
TO EMPOWERMENT

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TO EMPOWERMENT**

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INTRODUCTORY LETTER

I want you to know how happy we are that you have returned home. I also want you to know that you are not alone.

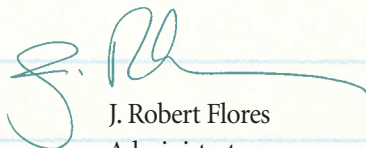
Every day, in communities across the country, children are abducted by people they know, by family members, by people they have met on the Internet, by acquaintances, and by complete strangers. It is estimated that more than one million children are reported missing each year. Fortunately, many of these children return home safely within a short period of time. Unfortunately, some do not return at all. And some children who return face major obstacles in their road to recovery and healing.

Several years ago, the Department of Justice, through its Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), pledged itself to helping the victims of abduction, whether it be the families, the siblings left behind, or the children themselves. We have created resources to help these families cope with the aftermath of abduction and begin the healing process.

With the assistance of family members who have experienced firsthand the abduction of a child, OJJDP created a guide for families of missing and abducted children, titled *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide*—one of the resources most widely requested and used by families of missing and abducted children. In 2006, we created *What About Me? Coping With the Abduction of a Brother or Sister*, which helps siblings who were left behind cope in the aftermath of the abduction.

This third document, *You're Not Alone: The Journey from Abduction to Empowerment*, was prepared with the assistance of young adults who were themselves abducted as children and who are walking the path of healing and recovery. It is designed to help others who experience abduction begin to put their lives back together. Each abduction is different, and so is the path to recovery. And though the road to recovery is different for everyone, the destination is the same—to find empowerment and normalcy, and to live as full a life as possible.

It is my sincere hope that this document will help you on your road to recovery. I look forward to the day when we no longer have to search for missing children. But until that day comes, I believe that this document, and those that preceded it, will help children and families move forward on their personal journeys from abduction to empowerment.



J. Robert Flores
Administrator

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS

Like you, we are survivors of abduction. We were abducted by strangers, by a parent, by someone known to the family, and by someone we believed was an online friend. Each of us had different experiences, which ultimately led us down different paths. Like you, we returned from those experiences and had to adjust to a whole new life.



Even though we are all survivors, we are also much more.

We are college students, musicians, dancers, artists, athletes, and advocates. We are daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, boyfriends and girlfriends, friends, roommates, and community members. One day we will be husbands and wives, parents, teachers, forensic psychologists, and lawyers.

As you are all too aware, the journey can be tough. Our experiences—the abduction itself, our responses to it, and other life events—have shaped our lives in ways that we didn't always expect. We are who we are today because we chose to turn a negative experience into a positive one and to move forward on our journey from abduction to empowerment.

The paths we followed have not always been direct or smooth, but we have realized that the progression of life goes on. We want you to know that you can make choices and move forward, just as we have. We stood right where you are standing now—wondering what was in store for us in the future, how we were going to get there, and what we were going to face in the process. We are happy to tell you that we not only survived, but we have learned to thrive.

We have been where you are in your journey. You are not alone. As difficult as it may seem, you will get through this. It will get better. You will learn and you will grow. It is possible for you to continue on in your life and become who you want to be. We hope you will let us walk beside you as you go through your journey.

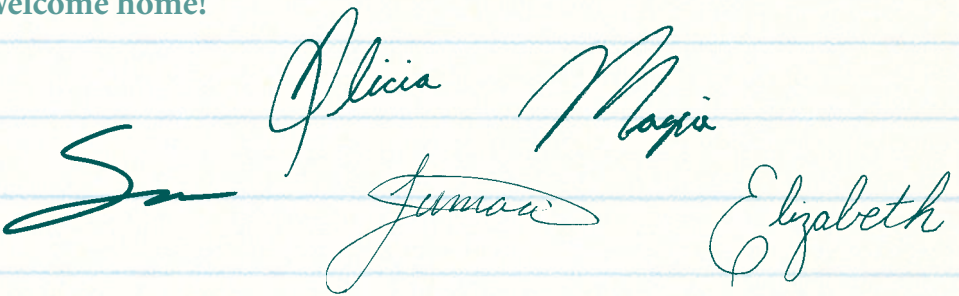
This book was created for and by survivors of abduction, with the guidance and assistance of the Department of Justice. We are telling our stories because we hope they will help you believe in yourself and give you hope for your future. Please know that what happened to you is your story, and you can tell it if you want, how you want, when you want, and to whom you want.

Always remember that the abduction was not your fault. You survived something that was out of your control. You can reassume control and, in the process, come out stronger. Your life is different now—there is a “new normal.” That is what we mean by the journey from abduction to empowerment. It’s the road you walk as you heal and grow, and learn to take back the reins of your own life.

We cannot say exactly how you should move forward. We can tell you, however, that your experience does not have to destroy your life. Our hope is that our words will give you encouragement and ideas about where to start. The most important thing to remember is that you have a life ahead of you and that it can be what you want it to be.

You are a survivor. We hope that you will choose to keep hoping, move forward, and recover your joy in life. Take care of yourself. Don’t be too hard on yourself. The journey will take time. But you will make it.

Welcome home!



The image shows five handwritten signatures in teal ink. From left to right, they are: a stylized initial 'S', the name 'Alicia', the name 'Maria', the name 'Juman', and the name 'Elizabeth'.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In 2007, we were invited to be part of writing a book for others who survived an abduction and returned home. Many of us remember wishing we had someone to talk with in those early days who had been through a similar experience. We all knew that we wanted to be part of this project because we saw its potential to help others who were probably feeling as frightened and alone as we once did.

“One step at a time, one foot in front of the other. That’s how you move on. There is something more for you to do . . . you survived for a reason!” — Maggie

We came together with a team of professionals who had worked on similar documents to share our thoughts and ideas about what someone in these shoes would need to know. For many of us, this was the first time that we had a chance to talk to other survivors. We realized how important it was to connect with someone else who had a similar experience, even if all the details were not exactly the same. We hope that is what this book can do for you.

The book is divided into five sections, each dealing with different aspects of your personal journey from abduction to empowerment. The first section focuses on the journey itself and what you might expect along the way. The second discusses finding those who can help you through your journey. Section three is about retaking control of your life and making the choices that are right for you. The fourth section talks about roadblocks you may face in the process, and some possible ways that you can handle them successfully. The final section deals with finding the “new normal” in your life.

Each section includes a personal letter from one of us with our thoughts to help you through your journey. To make sure that we had input from as many different perspectives as possible, the team reached out to other young people who had been through similar experiences. Throughout the book you will see quotes from the five of us and from four other survivors of abduction—Josh, Lindsey, Sarah and Trevor. We want to thank them for having the courage to share their experience and taking the time to share their thoughts.

This book is a resource for you. Whether you read every word, skim pieces that grab your attention, or put it down until you’re ready to look at it again later, we hope it helps you understand that you truly are not alone.

SECTION 1: YOUR JOURNEY



You may be picking this book up in the days following your abduction, or it may be months or even many years since your abduction. No matter where you are, how long it has been, or what level of healing you have found, it is okay. This is a journey—a process. Everyone handles it differently. Just know that as difficult as it may be, things get better. There is hope. What's important is that you are ready to hear from others who, like you, have survived an abduction.

You will have good days and bad days in the months and years to come. Sometimes you may feel your journey will never end. Sometimes it may seem you are retracing the same steps over and over. Some journeys take longer than others.

What is important is not to compare yourself to anyone else. The circumstances of your abduction and your survival were unique to you. Your healing process will be unique as well.

Your home life will probably be different and may never go back to the way it used to be. If you were gone for a while, or abducted at a young age, you may not remember what it was like before your abduction and you may need to get to know members of your family from scratch. Your routine, as you remember it, may be completely different now. You may feel that your abduction has become a point of reference—there will always be a “before” and an “after” this happened to you. This may be sad, frightening, and confusing all at the same time.

“There’s no sign that says you’ve arrived, you’re here, but things do align and start working. It is possible to be happy. What you’ve gone through isn’t the end of the world, because you’re still here. We can’t show you how to get over it, but we can show you it is possible.” — Sam

You may feel that you need some space to deal with what has happened, but that others do not want to let you be alone right now. You may feel torn between what you want and need, and what others think you want and need. You may want to talk, or you may want to be quiet. You may want others to be near you physically, or you may not want anyone to touch you. Sometimes all you want is to be alone, but at the same time you might be afraid of being alone.

You also may feel guilty for what happened, or others may make you feel that way. You may realize that your parents and siblings also experienced trauma, that life changed for them as well. As a result, they may have their own issues to work through. They may be overprotective or seem distant. It will probably take time to sort through everything and find the balance between what you need and what they need.

It will take time to process what happened to you. It took time for all of us as well. Although time really does make things better, it cannot make what happened go away. All you can do is choose to make the best of it, and to make an effort to turn the negative experience you went through into something positive.

We found specific strategies that helped us along our journeys. Keep in mind that the same strategies didn't work for each of us. As you embark on your journey, you will have to find out what works for you and what doesn't. Take your time, and trust your instincts.

“Getting better doesn't always happen in a straight line. It comes and goes in waves, or cycles, like taking two steps forward and one step back. It's a journey you move through on your way to the other side. The important thing, though, is to keep going.” — Tamara

For information on additional resources, please see “Where to Find More Help” on page 60.

TALKING TO SOMEONE

Talking about what happened is an important part of your healing. This is not something that you can handle on your own. You will find that many people will want to talk with you, and you may even feel bombarded by their interest in you. As you begin to open up, make sure that you talk about it in your own time and in your own way. Use this as an opportunity to take control of this portion of your life again.



Sometimes you may want to talk about what happened; other times it's the last thing you want to discuss. Remember that, apart from law enforcement's investigation of your case, you have to share only what you want to share, and only when you are ready.

When you *are* ready, find someone you trust. Some of us confided in our parents—their unconditional love and support has helped us throughout our journey. Others of us found it difficult to talk with parents and other family members who were also struggling with how to cope. Some of us who returned from a family abduction also found it difficult to talk with a parent or with other family members who were, in many ways, strangers to us. Many of us were successful in finding a counselor or therapist who helped us along our journeys.

We all learned that the key to finding someone to confide in was to find someone we trusted. This may have been someone who was helpful in our lives before the abduction, or someone new. We all found it important to find someone who was objective without being judgmental, who let us speak in our own voices and in our own time, and who had our interests at heart. It was important to find someone who could provide us with strength and guidance to help us make our own decisions.

“Ignoring the problem doesn't help.” — Alicia

Most important was finding someone just for us with whom we felt comfortable.

Remember, you cannot do this alone. Asking for help is not a weakness. It is a strength and an important part of the healing process. Here are some of the people we turned to when we needed them the most:

- >> Parents.
- >> Brothers and sisters.
- >> Other family members—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.
- >> Best friends.
- >> Boyfriends or girlfriends.
- >> Counselors.
- >> Clergy.
- >> Teachers.
- >> Coaches.
- >> Friends.
- >> Other trusted adults.
- >> Others who had undergone similar experiences, like a support group.

Keep in mind that what you need may change from moment to moment, and that you may need to talk with different people about different aspects of your life and the abduction. Each of us found multiple people whom we trusted in different ways to help us with different parts of our journey.

FINDING POSITIVE OUTLETS

There will be times when you wish that things could go back to the way they were before the abduction, and times that you wish it had never happened. There will be times when your world seems grim. This is normal and to be expected. When you find yourself thinking, “What if?,” engaging in activities that you enjoyed before the abduction may be a healthy outlet for your emotions now. You might also want to try a new activity to see if it helps. If it doesn’t, try another until you find a positive outlet.

“When something like this happens, it leaves a void inside of you. You basically have two choices: You can fill it with negative things, like alcohol, drugs, or promiscuity; or you can fill it with good works and a good heart.” — Alicia

Here are some things that worked for us:

- >> Keeping a journal.
- >> Dancing.
- >> Attending a class.
- >> Painting and drawing.
- >> Listening to music.
- >> Reading.
- >> Playing an instrument.
- >> Exercising.
- >> Playing sports.
- >> Going to the movies.
- >> Taking up a new hobby.
- >> Going shopping.
- >> Spending time with family.
- >> Spending time with positive and good people because they will naturally bring you up and you will be likely to do positive things for yourself.
- >> Setting a personal goal to do something new every day, even if it is something very small.
- >> Spending time with friends who let you talk about it if you want to, but don't force you to talk about it if you don't.

“Competitive running is what saved me. I had to get back to what I loved, back to what defined me. I fought so hard for it. I was not going to let my abductor take that away from me.” — Maggie

“If you feel bad about yourself, do something that will make you feel good, like getting your hair cut, or something that you used to do before the abduction. Even if it feels weird. Spend time with other people, but don't be afraid to be alone. No one will heal like you, and patience with other people is the first step to your own healing.” — Lindsey

TAMARA'S STORY

Life, I have found, is not so much about the endpoint, but about the journey and how one responds to experiences along the way. It is filled with hidden corners, obstacles that may seem impossible to overcome, mighty triumphs, pain, fear, utter happiness, passion, and events one could never imagine until they become a reality.



I would like to share part of my life story with you, a story that begins when I was 16 years old and was kidnapped at gunpoint by a man I did not know. I open myself to you because we have two things in common. We were abducted and made it back alive, and we both have the ability to take back what was snatched from us—the freedom to live our lives.

The importance of telling you my story lies in the things I have done to empower myself in response to that experience. It lies in my journey, filled with hard work, healing, challenges, and triumphs over the trauma. As much as I would love to say that one day you will wake up and the work will be over, it will not. However, it does get easier with time.

I hope that sharing my successes and the mistakes that I have made in dealing with my abduction will help you on your journey. I have turned my own journey, although it has had its hardships, heartbreaks, and pain, into something amazing, not because I am a superhero in disguise, but because of how I chose to respond to what happened.

My name is Tamara and I am 21 years old. I will be finishing my bachelor's degree in June 2008. I have been dancing since high school and I spend as much of my free time as possible out with friends, my family, at the beach, or curling up with a good book and my kitty. When I was 16, my life took an unexpected turn when I was kidnapped from my hometown.

Before that point I was an ordinary teenager—boy crazy like all of my friends, excited about my first real prom still a year away, and 2 years shy of graduating

high school. I played sports, was a straight “A” student, and was always doing something goofy to make my friends laugh. The summer I turned 16 I felt on top of the world. A week after my 16th birthday, on July 31, 2002, when I was at a lookout point with one of my best friends, I was abducted at gunpoint and my friend was left behind, tied up. I was then to endure one of the most difficult experiences of my life.

A few hours later, my captor took another young woman. Together we chose to fight back and although we were unsuccessful, we did not give up. Approximately 16 hours later we were found, largely thanks to the success of California’s first AMBER Alert. After he fired a shot from his gun, our captor was shot to death by the police. Moments later it was over. We were safe. We had survived.

THE FIRST FEW HOURS

We were first taken to the hospital to ensure that we were okay. Upon our arrival, we were taken inside on gurneys, covered head to toe with sheets. The media, via the AMBER Alert, had been airing our story from the beginning, and as a result everyone wanted to be the first to get a picture of us or catch us on film.

Everything became a rush after that. Detectives questioned us and put us into separate rooms as the hospital performed a full medical examination to collect any physical evidence. That experience felt like another violation all over again, but it was necessary. At the time I did not understand what was going on or why I had to undergo so many procedures. I was still in a state of shock from the reality of being kidnapped, and then the reality of being found.

“When I came home, everyone wanted to hug me. The problem was that I didn’t want to be touched. At the same time, I understood that it was what they needed to help them heal and deal with what they had been through while I was missing. So, I thought okay, go ahead and hug me. And when I hugged my family, they also realized that I was uncomfortable and needed to be alone. We needed to reestablish boundaries. We needed time to figure out what was okay and what wasn’t.”

Once they finished with us at the hospital, we were taken on a private plane back to my hometown. In the days following, I found that I had suddenly become a celebrity. My name and photograph were splashed across newspapers.

Because of the media attention, everywhere I went people recognized me. Some simply stared; others would whisper; some would approach me and say, “You’re that girl.” I became, in their eyes, that girl who was kidnapped in the summer of 2002. But I did not allow that to define who I was or who I am today. True, the experience is a part of me and has helped shape me, but in no way does it encompass all of me, nor will it encompass all of you. Although some people may try to force that identity upon you, we choose who we want to be—not them.

I chose to be grateful, not for the fame, but for the gift I was granted: the gift of seeing how much people cared, and how compassionate they could be. It’s easy to forget that, especially after being kidnapped. But with this perspective I was able to see the vast amount of good there is in the world. So many people whom I never knew—and unfortunately may never get to meet—worked tirelessly to bring me home, as they did for you. That is something to think about. We matter that much to people—even ones we do not know, who were willing to do everything within their power to protect us. We were saved and are here for a reason. It’s an incredible feeling to know that.

RETURNING HOME

Coming home, I faced many obstacles, some of which I still experience from time to time. I began to have nightmares every night, and could not sleep. It became extremely difficult to concentrate in school. Things that used to come easily for me suddenly became a monumental challenge. I was depressed. I cried countless times, but through it all I knew I had a choice. I could choose to dwell on how difficult things were or I could focus on the positive. First and foremost I was alive. I had another day to live, another day to make things that much better. Sometimes just getting out of bed was a huge challenge, but I did it every single day. That may seem like a little thing, but the little things make the biggest difference.

From the moment I came home, I chose to look at my abduction in a positive light. I chose to believe that good will always triumph over evil, that I came home for a reason, and that something phenomenal was going to come out of my

“The day after I was rescued, I had to go with the detectives to try to retrace the steps, to take them to all the places where the evidence might be. That was extremely difficult. The last place I wanted to be was where it had all started. I had to relive it all, even though all I really wanted to do was to put it all behind me and move on. But I soon realized that putting it behind me was not going to be as easy as I hoped. I was able to take my brother with me to walk through everything, and that really helped. One of the most important things that I learned was that it is okay for you to say what you need. And it is okay to ask for someone to be with you if you want that.”

having been kidnapped and the hardships I faced. I believed that greatness could be found in the darkest of corners and chose to actively find that greatness.

As I was trying to cope with the negative emotions that were churning inside of me, especially the fear that things would not get any better, I made a conscious decision each day. I asked: How can I make today that much

better than yesterday? I found that focusing on the positive eased the impact the negative parts had on me.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Through trial and error I also found that the best thing I could do for myself was to take care of each of my responsibilities. I was a student and therefore I needed to attend class, do my homework, and turn it in. I needed to eat three healthy meals a day. I had to sleep. I had to get out of bed, shower, and brush my teeth. I fought procrastinating and the tendency to want to curl up under my blankets and take a break from the world. Giving into that inclination and isolating myself from life and friends only made things worse.

During the bad times, I needed to reach out to someone whom I trusted and could talk to. That “someone” had different faces. Sometimes it was a family member, my best friend, a special person who had become a mentor, or my counselor. I found that talking to someone was extremely important for me. Speaking to a counselor or therapist helped me tremendously, but talking to

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