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The Record

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A father's 'nightmare'

Wife accused of keeping kids 'hidden' in Korea for a year



CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Alejandro Mendoza waits in Dumont for his wife's extradition to the U.S. in a custody battle over their two children.

By **KIBRET MARKOS**
STAFF WRITER

Alejandro Mendoza paused for nearly a minute as he stared into the emptiness of a family room once filled with his children's laughs, searching for what he might say to his estranged wife if he could see her today.

"I would say to her that no father should ever have to go through this," the Broadway violinist finally said. "I would say to her that I am very sad things got



BILLY BECERRA/STAFF ARTIST

this far."

An international custody dispute between Mendoza and his wife, Si-Nae Shim, has kept him away from his two young children

for a year, and just last week landed Shim in a Guam jail on a Bergen County warrant.

Mendoza, who lives in Dumont and was granted full custody last

year by a county judge, said he has endured a year devoid of any hope that he will see his children again, as they remained "hidden" in a foreign country nearly 7,000 miles away.

That was until Shim was arrested last week as she traveled from South Korea, her homeland, to the U.S. territory of Guam.

Now, authorities are preparing to bring Shim to New Jersey to face charges that she kept their son and daughter in South Korea

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Custody: Father denies accusations

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without Mendoza's consent. Bergen County prosecutors have also charged Shim with interfering with custody, a second-degree charge that carries up to 10 years in prison.

"Now, there is hope," he said. "I would like my children to be back so this nightmare can end."

Shim's attorney, Christine Bae, said her client was actually heading for New Jersey after a two-day stop in Guam after being informed that she was scheduled for a court hearing today in Hackensack.

Meanwhile, Shim has filed a complaint in South Korea accusing Mendoza of molesting their young daughter, a charge he vehemently denies.

Missing home

Mendoza, 47, came to the United States from Chile as a teen, studied classical music at Juilliard and became an instructor at the Manhattan School of Music. He plays the violin in Broadway shows such as "The Lion King."

He and Shim, 33, who is also a violinist, married in 1996 and lived in Dumont with their two children, who are now 5 and 3. Together they opened the Amati Conservatory in Teaneck, a classical-music school for children.

But not long ago, Shim told Mendoza that she wanted to move to Korea for a time, having lost interest in the conservatory and having become impatient with life in the Western world, he said. Mendoza said he reluctantly agreed to live there for a year.

Early last year, the family settled in Hwaseong-si — about an hour south of the South Korean capital of Seoul.

Mendoza worked as a music teacher and Shim worked part time while taking care of the children, and she seemed happier than she had been in Dumont, he said.

Soon, however, Mendoza found out that his pay was half of what he had expected, he said.

Realizing that he was not making enough to support a family of four, and fearing that a prolonged absence from the United States would jeopardize his teaching jobs here, he decided to return briefly and lay the foundation for a permanent move back to the U.S., he said.

Shim was not happy, he said. "But still she drove me to the airport with the kids," he said. "We hugged and said goodbye. I told my son I would return in eight days."

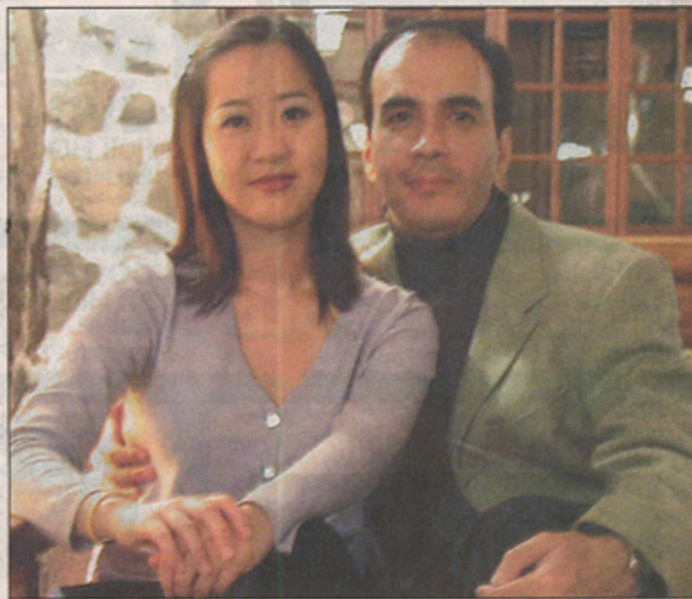
A shocking charge

Mendoza returned to the United States in late April 2009. A few days later, Shim called to warn him that if he returned to Korea, he would be arrested on charges that he had molested their daughter, who was 2 years old at the time, he said.

Bae, Shim's attorney, has a different version. She said the cou-



Alejandro Mendoza of Dumont, with his daughter Haerin and son Kristian. Below, Mendoza with his wife, Si-Nae Shim, who was arrested in the U.S. territory of Guam.



ple's son said that he saw his father touch his sister inappropriately. Mendoza left Korea shortly after a criminal complaint was filed against him, Bae said.

Bae also said medical records provided to Korean authorities indicated sexual abuse.

Mendoza's attorney, Galit Moskowitz, said the abuse allegations are "completely unfounded."

"We deny those allegations in their entirety," she said. "The reality of the matter is that those children need to be returned to New Jersey."

Scott Laterra, another attorney for Mendoza, said Shim filed a criminal complaint a few days before Mendoza left Korea, and then told him about it after he arrived in the United States.

Mendoza, meanwhile, has launched a Web site — bringthe-

kidshome.org — and asked for support in a legal battle that he said is ruining him emotionally and financially.

He filed papers in family court in Hackensack and eventually obtained custody of both children in October.

"But the court granted custody because they didn't know about the criminal case in Korea," Bae said.

Bae said Mendoza was granted custody because Shim's attorneys at the time failed to file papers in response.

Last week, Superior Court Judge Alexander H. Carver issued an order finding Shim in contempt of court and issued a warrant for her arrest.

Bae said the children are now with their maternal grandmother in South Korea, and stressed that Mendoza knows exactly where

Other cases

■ Maria Jose Carrascosa is serving a 14-year term in state prison after she was convicted last year of unlawfully taking her daughter, Victoria, to her native Spain and keeping her there — despite court orders to bring her back to her custodial father, Peter Innes of Hasbrouck Heights. Innes was granted custody by Bergen County courts, but Carrascosa says New Jersey has no jurisdiction over the case.

■ David Goldman of Tinton Falls was reunited with his son, Sean, last year after a fierce international custody battle kept the boy in Brazil for five years. Sean was 4 when he left for Brazil with his mother, Bruna Bianchi, who then refused to return to the United States. Bianchi died in 2008, and Sean lived with his grandparents until a Brazilian court ordered his return to his father in December.

they are.

"It's not like she kidnapped anyone," Bae said. "They all went to Korea together."

Mendoza said he has been able to talk to the children once in a while over the phone but has lost touch for the past three weeks.

"Last time I spoke to my son, he said, 'Dad, please come over quick,'" Mendoza said. "He must be suffering as much as I am."

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