

UNSOLVED

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reward for a tip leading to the arrest of the kidnapper, the still ongoing Amber Alert (an alert containing information about a missing child, issued by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement through radio, television, highway billboards, lottery machines, missingchildrenalert.com email notices, and cellular telephone text messaging).

There was the midnight vigil led by Suarez; the pictures taken of the baby's mother, Maria Fatima Ramos dos Santos, 23, and father, Jurandir Gomes Costa, 26; the press conferences held with Fort Myers Police Chief Hilton Daniels; the collaboration of local (Fort Myers), state (FDLE) and federal (FBI) investigative personnel, along with other private and non-profit groups.

Non-profit Kid Finders Network, Inc., for example, uses mobile billboards to display the faces and information of missing children.

"When (the billboards) first got there, in the first month or so, they were generating a lot of leads," company Vice president Sherri Milstead said. "Not so much anymore. It gets out of sight, out of mind with people, so you have to remind them, spark people's interest."

Flyers were handed out by local church members, door to door. Leaders of the search for baby dos Santos-Gomes remained "confident" and "hopeful."

Mostly anonymous internet bloggers with names like "2cents" and "billybob" added hundreds of opinions of their own: that the parents were completely to blame, that the media couldn't be trusted, that everything we heard was simply being made up, that racism was the central factor, that illegal immigration was the central factor, that the baby was in Fort Myers, Tampa, Miami, Mexico, Brazil, Cuba, that the baby was being well-cared for, that it wasn't.

"We're really not heavily involved in the case at this point, unless (the Fort Myers police) ask us for more help," FDLE Public Information Officer Larry Long said. "But from an FDLE standpoint, the amber alert we issued is still ongoing."

Psychics weighed in.

Family holds out hope

Baby dos Santos-Gomes was, and still is lost.

His parents continue to live in the Tropical Trailer Park on Linhart Avenue in central Fort Myers.

Park manager Thelma Fuentes provided an escort, via golf cart, through the dense clusters of trailers, to the home of Ramos dos Santos and Gomes Costa, late last week.

"The cops were here every day," she said, remembering the days from last December, just after the abduction. "Not just the city cops — Rev. Suarez and pastors for the Brazilian community, too."

Ramos dos Santos came to the door for this unannounced visit in a black dress, holding a mop. Her bare feet stood on gleaming plastic tiles. Fuentes translated.

Ramos dos Santos and her husband, who was at work, are still in contact with investigators, she said, but have been given no new information recently. "Just that they're looking into it," she added.

The motivation to live and work has at times been a frustrating process for her husband, she noted — the crushing pain of an enormous personal loss coupled with the relatively difficult life of immigrants.

"He works when he can," she said. "It's been kind of rough..."

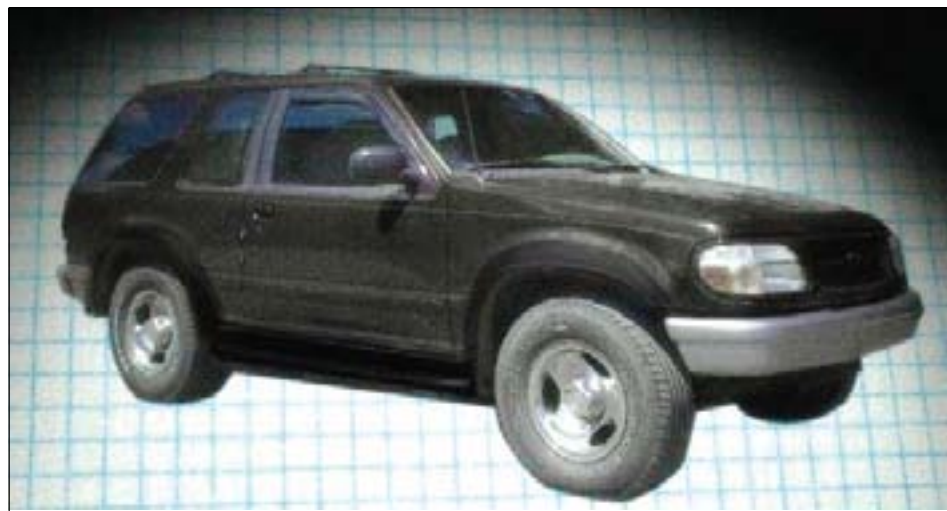
"I'm feeling fine. I'm still waiting."

The kidnapping suspect was and still is described by police as a heavyset Spanish woman, 25 to 30 years old, driving a black 2-door Ford Explorer Sport circa



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

This billboard on State Road 82 in Fort Myers announces the Amber Alert for baby Bryan dos Santos-Gomes. Baby Bryan was kidnapped eight months ago. Below is a photograph of a truck that is similar to the truck believed to have been driven by the unknown suspect.



"The more this story stays alive in the public's mind, the better chance the case will be resolved,"
— FBI Agent John Kuchta

1998 to 2003, with peeling window tint, who may or may not have been headed to Tampa/St. Petersburg or Miami with baby dos Santos-Gomes.

Another clue to her identity, and therefore perhaps her whereabouts, is the surreal, hypothetical drawing of her face.

While the drawing may look something like the suspected kidnapper, it may also look something like a lot of people who happen to be female, Spanish, heavyset and in their mid 20s. The point, according to Matt Sellers, a Fort Myers police detective, is to keep the public interested — to give people something to look for, if for no other reason than just so they'll keep looking.

"The sketches keep the public's attention," Sellers said.

Cops still working clues

FBI Agent John Kuchta also stressed the importance of public attention. "The more this story stays alive in the public's mind, the better chance the case will be resolved," he said.

Another clue is the recorded sound of the alleged kidnapper's voice. Law enforcement and news reports indicate the suspect made a fake call to a business, during the kidnapping, using Ra-

mos dos Santos' cell-phone. The call was recorded on the businesses answering machine and the recording is now available on the FBI's website.

Two official theories were developed. One, that the woman simply wanted a baby; maybe, police suspected, she had lost one of her own recently. Another theory was posed to the media by Hilton Daniels, the Fort Myers police chief, after he learned that the parents were illegal immigrants who still owed a debt to the people who smuggled them into this country.

Daniels suggested that because of this debt the baby was taken as either payment or leverage; that the kidnapper was playing a part in a larger plan.

That theory has not been ruled out, Sellers said, but added that it's only one of the possibilities — one of hundreds of leads, some simple and some complex, that have been investigated.

The FBI's Kuchta echoes that explanation: "There's been a lot of publicity and we've covered leads throughout the country, even in South and Central America, and overseas," he said.

In the months after the investigation began, publicity went from a gush to a trickle. "There aren't a lot of new leads coming in right now," Sellers said. "Maybe one new lead in the last two weeks."

"I've had a lot of leads that look great initially, and then kind of fizz out real fast."

"It's true that there are only so many things you can work on, so many leads to follow and people to talk to, but we're still a long way from that point."

Information



>>The **unknown suspect** is described as a heavyset, Mexican American (possibly second generation) woman with long, straight, black hair. English may be her first language.

>> **Baby Bryan dos Santos-Gomes** was born Nov. 3, 2006. He was abducted on Dec. 1. At the time he was 2-foot tall and weighed about 12 pounds. He has brown hair and brown eyes.



To complicate matters, earlier on in the investigation questions were raised about how truthful or forthcoming the parents were being with law enforcement officials — possibly because of their status as illegal immigrants.

Sellers dismisses that notion, for the most part: "The parents are fully cooperative with the investigation. There is a substantial amount of evidence both physical and circumstantial that supports the parents statements."

"Immigration," he added, "seems to cloud issues."

Then there was the "language barrier." The parents speak Portuguese, a language similar to Spanish, which added another level of complexity to the investigation.

"A lot of confusion was caused early on," Sellers concluded.

He is now in touch with the parents on a weekly basis to update them on whatever progress has been made, he says.

"This case is being pursued daily," said Jennifer Soto, a Fort Myers police sergeant who is assigned to the investigation. "We are still very hopeful that we will solve this case."

Suarez, meanwhile, said that he still sees the parents whenever he can, and that they feel police have not been able to do enough.

"But at this point, you can't put pressure on the system," he added. "It's a difficult case. They have no choice whatsoever but to have patience. There's just not enough evidence, and so many different avenues." ■