



TEXAS POLYGAMY CASE

A JOYOUS REUNION

After a Texas court rules in their favor, a handful of FLDS children are returned to their parents



TOGETHER
ONCE AGAIN

Lori and Joseph reunited with kids (from left) Joeson, Ziana and J.R.; (top) Lori with Ziana.

For seven weeks Lori and Joseph Jessop Sr. had wondered when—and, in their darker moments, if—they would be reunited as a family with their three children. Swept up in the April raid on the polygamist ranch in Eldorado, Texas, the two older kids—Ziana, 4, and Joseph (“Joeson”), 2—were eventually sent to a state children’s home, while Lori tended to 1-year-old J.R. at a separate location and Joseph

waited anxiously back at the ranch. But on May 23 a judge ruled that the Jessops could regain temporary custody of their children. The Jessops, ignoring the rigidly nutritious diet of the group, took the kids out to celebrate at a drive-through Dairy Queen, where they ordered chicken strips, tater tots and milk shakes. “That night I just kept reassuring myself that they were truly right there in my arms,” Lori said, “and that J.R. was nearby in his crib.”



After getting back with his mom and dad, Joeson went for a stroll.

“The house felt so empty. There was just so much missing”

—JOSEPH JESSOP SR.

How many of the other kids belonging to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints will be returned to their parents is still very much an open question. In all, authorities seized some 460 children from the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, alleging that the polygamist cult had sanctioned sexual and physical abuse—including the marriages of underage girls. The Jessops and two other families were given their kids back because they showed that, though members of the FLDS, they were living in monogamous marriages. As for the other children scattered in facilities throughout the state in one of the largest child-custody cases in U.S. history, the Texas court of appeals issued a stinging opinion lambasting a district court judge for allowing the removal of the children without any hard evidence that they were in imminent danger of abuse.

The Jessops, currently staying near San Antonio, agreed to talk to PEOPLE about their experience only under strict conditions: They would not discuss life at the compound (including whether

they witnessed any abuse) or the subject of polygamy. It was also impossible to confirm details of their account, since Texas authorities have declined to comment on individual cases. But Lori, 25, and Joseph, 27, describe a harrowing and bewildering ordeal. They begin with the gun-pointing Texas Rangers and others who first showed up at the ranch, and end with the moment two of their children—sick-

ened by the conditions at makeshift San Angelo, Texas, shelters—were whisked away May 2. “They tore them out of my arms, pushed them inside the van and slammed the doors so I couldn’t hear them screaming anymore,” Lori says, breaking down in tears. “The windows were dark so I couldn’t see them very well, but I waved and waved. It was the worst moment of my life.”

According to officials at some of the shelters where other YFZ children have been placed, the kids have shown differing reactions to their new surroundings. Some have been sullen and uncooperative, while others have seemingly taken the opportunity to try out a new lifestyle. Dr. David Miller, the CEO of Hendrick Home for Children in Abilene, Texas, says some of the boys, for instance, have resisted wearing the long clothing favored by the sect.

Officials are still waiting for the results of DNA samples taken from the children, which should confirm or dismiss suspicions that a large number of them were fathered by a few elders in the sect. But for Lori Jessop the pain of separation persists. “Ziana has caught me crying a couple of times. She’ll say, ‘Mother, why are you crying? I’m right here!’ Because I used to say that to her—and now she says it to me.”

By Bill Hewitt, Anne Lang and Cary Cardwell in San Antonio and Darla Atlas in Fort Worth



THEIR DAY
IN COURT

Three families won back their kids after a series of hearings in Texas.