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## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **A Family Reunited Thanks to iStand Parent Network**

*International abduction separated dad from two daughters for more than a year.*

It was the call Bart Critser had been waiting for since his ex-wife took his daughters to Denmark for what was supposed to be a four-week vacation but was a ploy to rip them from his life forever.

“We found them,” the FBI agent said, uttering the words that Critser had longed to hear over more than a year of sleepless nights, missed birthdays and holidays, frantic internet searches, court proceedings in multiple countries, and frustrating bureaucratic red tape.

That call marked the end of a nightmare that started with a contentious divorce and ended when his youngest daughter leaped into his arms in a courthouse thousands of miles away from his Texas home.

“There had been days when I struggled just to get out of bed and my family had to rally around me just so I could function,” he said. “I thought about them every second of the day. The anger, the fear and frustration drained me emotionally and physically. Even with my daughters safe at home, it has taken some time to heal.”

That could have been the end of the story for Critser and his daughters, who are still recovering from life on the run in Europe with their mother, but Critser is now paying forward the support of the organization he credits for his daughters' recovery. His family's endowment, the Raymond B. Preston Family Foundation, has awarded a \$95,000 grant to iStand Parent Network to expand their International Parents Conference & Embassy Walk.

### **About iStand**

It wasn't until a Google-searching family member stumbled upon the iStand website that Critser realized he was far from alone. The Kentucky organization was founded in 2014 by the parents of other victims of International Parental Childhood Abductions (IPCA), a federal crime that occurs when a parent takes or holds a child out of the country in violation of court orders or custodial agreements.

Co-founder [Dr. Noelle Hunter](#), a University of Alabama political science professor, was still fighting for the return of her daughter from Mali, West Africa when she joined with Randall Murphy, to organize iStand. Hunter serves as president of the iStand board of directors. Murphy, whose children were abducted by his ex-wife after a trip to the British Columbia, serves as vice president and chief parent advocate.



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Hunter's daughter Muna was 4 when she was taken out of the country by her father despite not having the child's passport or permission from Hunter as specified in the joint custody agreement. With the relentless resolve that helped her beat a cocaine addiction years before, she fought fiercely in the United States and in Mali for her daughter's return. She staged a protest at the Mali Embassy in Washington, D.C. She also rallied Kentucky legislators, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Sen. Rand Paul and U.S. Rep. Harold Rogers to assist with outreach to the Mali government.

Her story gained [national attention](#). She provided [congressional testimony](#) on IPCA and was appointed to one of the highest positions in [Kentucky government](#), platforms from which she pushed for greater IPCA awareness and protections.

"My own story was triumphant and glorious, but unfortunately, many parents and grandparents are not so fortunate," she said. "Unfortunately, there is no manual for recovering children and no two cases are exactly the same, but every success, every failure and every connection that we can share saves someone else a lot of time, money and heartache."

The mission of iStand is to stand in solidarity with parents impacted by IPCA, prevalent in part because there are no controls at airports and borders to prevent parents from taking children out of the country. Language barriers, cultural biases, extensive legal fees and traveling expenses, complicated international court systems and bureaucratic red tape make recovering children from some countries nearly impossible, Hunter said. The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges for parents seeking the return of their children as many foreign courts and governments have shut down or have limited operations.

With a team of volunteers who moonlight as legal resources, coaches and sympathizers, iStand has aided in the recovery of 47 children from more than 20 countries, including two countries, Mexico and India, considered to be most noncompliant by the U.S. State Department. Like Critser, some parents begin helping others even before their own children are returned.

"There is never an expectation that any of our parents pay it forward; it's enough to survive it," said Hunter, who also volunteers her time. "We've been blessed that many of our parents and grandparents are willing to use their experiences to help others. We are the absolute experts on IPCA; no one knows it like someone who has lived through it."

The grant from Critser's family's endowment, the Preston Family Foundation, will allow iStand to begin meeting the rising demand for services from parents. The organization's track record and outreach efforts have led to an increased number of referrals from the U.S. Department of State, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, other clients and the organization's website and social media. Hunter said the grant will allow iStand to hire Murphy for its first paid position, a part-time parent advocate to provide direct services to new families. Murphy will handle client intake, case assessment and plan development and resource referrals and help build and maintain a member and resource database.

"We currently field one to two calls a week from new contacts and maintain a case load of 15-20 active cases," Hunter said. "Our volunteers are incredibly resourceful and generous with their time, but we simply cannot take on the volume of cases we would like to. So many families need our help."



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## The conference

The [iStand International Parents Conference & Embassy Walk](#) was first held in 2014, about a month before Hunter traveled to Mali to retrieve her daughter, with about 14 parents in attendance. Since then, the conference has grown steadily, drawing about 72 supporters in 2019.

The first day of the conference includes meetings with policy makers to lobby for a federal IPCA awareness month and for reforms to the 2014 [Goldman Act](#).

The second day also includes various workshops, an international coffee hour for networking and an awards luncheon. The keynote speaker this year will be Caitlin Krauss, a research criminologist on [The Vanished Podcast](#), which features a different missing person's case each week. Krauss will present her research on internationally abducted children, discuss United States visa and immigration policies, review existing criminal remedies, and discuss IPCA reform.

There also is an awards ceremony highlighting the IPCA champions -- a Crusader Award for parent advocates, an iStand Champion Award for a public figure or legislator and the Beacon Award for a social media activist. Sen. Mitch McConnell, who has supported many IPCA initiatives and iStand parents, including Critser, is a former recipient of the Champion Award.

The third day features an Embassy Walk, where parents meet with representatives from nations where children are abducted and are coached by iStand volunteers in making assistance requests and raising awareness about IPCA.

"Our goal is to bring government and parents together to break down barriers," Hunter said. "This is also a time for us to coach our parents on how to make specific asks of their state delegation and share the challenges they are facing in recovering their children."

## Not by chance

Hunter's unique tie to Henderson, Kentucky helped land the grant from the Preston Foundation. The small town, located on the Kentucky border with Indiana, became a refuge for Hunter in 2007 while she recovered from a drug addiction in 2007.

Hunter first used crack cocaine while living in Chicago in 1997, but always thought she had her usage under control. She managed to complete her graduate and doctorate degrees and land a job as a professor at Morehead State University before her addiction spiraled out of control. She was arrested in 2007 after she was found using drugs in a car with her baby.

She went to Women's Addiction Recovery Manor (WARM) to beat her addiction, get her record expunged and regain custody of her daughter. But her marriage did not survive, and her drug history worked against her in the custody battle despite her sobriety.

"In Mali, drug abuse is highly stigmatized, so even though I wasn't using anymore, he was able to use my past to his advantage, at least for a time," she said.

She realized the significance of her connection to Henderson and to WARM in 2019, when she applied for the grant from the Henderson-based Preston Family Foundation. Founded in 1990 by Critser's



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grandfather, the foundation has awarded more than \$11 million in grants to organizations with ties to Henderson and Western Kentucky.

“During one of my conversations with the Critsers while they were contemplating the grant request, I mentioned WARM and asked if they knew the founder, Dale Sights,” she said. “Turns out, Dale is the vice president of the bank owned by the Preston family, and I was able to tell them that Dale could vouch for me.”

The connection helped iStand land a \$10,000 grant in 2019 and an additional \$95,000 grant in July.

Critser was unaware of Hunter’s Henderson connection when his aunt discovered iStand a few months after his daughters were abducted. He credits iStand for the return of his daughters from their mother, who also battled an addiction. His ex-wife, who struggles with alcoholism, was on the run with the girls for nearly 2 years after a bitter divorce until she had a car crash that helped authorities locate her.

“She crashed into a fence on a farm and the farmer did a Google search of her name to try to find her,” Critser said. “One of the first things iStand had me do was create an extensive online and social media presence to share my story and information about any sighting of the girls. Because I followed that advice, that farmer was able to pull up tons of information about the case and contact me.”

### **The future**

Hunter hopes funding from the foundation – and outreach at the conference this month – will garner funding for additional initiatives and increased advocacy for reform.

Among the organization’s goals is the expansion of post-recovery services for children and families.

“Our primary concern is supporting the parents in getting their children back, but we never forget that the real victims are the children,” she said. “We currently have a partner who delivers some aftercare to our families, but this is an area where we could do more with additional support.”

Hunter’s daughter, Muna, has adapted well with the help of her family. She has two older sisters -- Rysa, who was inspired by her family’s ordeal to become a family law attorney and Rachel, a book author who is working on a doctorate in art. Muna is now an iStand volunteer and helps with tasks ranging from stuffing envelopes to joining protests on behalf of other abducted children.

“It’s crazy to think that she was 4 and into Dora the Explorer when she was taken and 7 when she returned and is now a teenager,” Hunter said. “She remembers everything that happened back then, and she misses her father, who has chosen not to be involved in her life.”

Critser said his girls are adjusting well to life in Texas and have warmed up to their stepmother and step-siblings.

“My wife and I have worked hard to give them as normal a life as possible, as if they are just back home from a long vacation away from us,” he said. “As crazy as the pandemic has been, it has been a welcome excuse for keeping them close and allowing them to ease into their lives. Working with iStand has been a way for me to heal from my own trauma by pouring my emotion and energy into helping other families.”

Critser expressed his gratitude for the safe return of his daughter on the Facebook page where he documented his ordeal.



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"Thank you ALL for your prayers, your shares and your enormous support during this stressful ordeal," said Critser. "Thank you to especially to the US Department of State and the FBI for their unwavering dedication to my children. I would also like to offer special praise to the offices of Senator Lamar Alexander, Senator Mitch McConnell, Senator Rand Paul and especially Representative Dan Crenshaw for their support, assistance and efforts to help return my daughters safely."

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