

AMBER, the alarm that saves lives

JENNIFER R. ZWAHR-CASTRO*

Arlington, Texas, is a pleasant American city with a reputation as an excellent place in which to raise a family. A city of 344,000 located approximately one hour south of the Texas-Oklahoma border, Arlington is a suburban city populated by families trying to escape the problems associated with life in big cities like nearby Dallas. In contrast to larger urban areas, the city has a slower pace of life and a lower crime rate. In 2002, there were only 2 attempted kidnappings, 94 missing persons, and three lost children and the city was ranked among the safest in Texas. Yet, on January 13, 1996, a crime that was and is relatively uncommon in Arlington resulted in the death of a child and created a national and international movement to protect children everywhere.

Amber Hagerman was only nine years old when she disappeared while riding her bicycle near her home. Although police located a neighbor who was able to furnish a description of the vehicle involved in the abduction, there was no way to quickly disseminate the information to the community. Despite the efforts of law enforcement and

subsequent community involvement, Amber's nude body was found four days later, floating face-down in a creek, her throat cut.

The tragedy devastated the Arlington community. Outraged parents and community members began to search for a better, faster and more effective method of publicizing information about missing children. Finding a missing child quickly was determined to be one of the keys to ensuring that child's safe recovery.

The United States Department of Justice estimates that there are almost half a million child abductions or attempted abductions annually (The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children). Some of these children will be found and returned safely to their families. Unfortunately, some children will never be found and many others will be found murdered. Of those children who are killed by their kidnapper, 74% are killed within the first three hours following the abduction. Recovering an abducted child quickly increases the



* **JENNIFER R. ZWAHR-CASTRO, PH.D.** is an assistant professor of Psychology at St. Mary's University. Her doctorate is in Experimental Psychology with an emphasis in social psychology. Her research focuses on motivation for learning, cross-cultural differences in conflict resolution and cultural differences in cross-race identification.

probability that the child will be recovered at all.

During the time between Amber's abduction and when she was found, the north Texas community exhausted all existing means of finding her. Police bulletins were issued, newspapers published stories, local news publicized the case, community groups distributed fliers and the Federal Bureau of Investigations was notified. But implementing and organizing the search took precious time; time that Amber didn't have and would never have again. In response to the outrage over Amber's tragic death and following suggestions from Dallas area residents, the Dallas/Fort Worth Association of Radio Managers teamed with local law enforcement agencies to develop a system that has come to be known as the AMBER Alert Plan.

The AMBER Alert Plan, officially America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response, uses the existing Emergency Broadcast System. After local law enforcement is notified that a child has been abducted, specific criteria must be met in order to trigger the plan. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children advocate the following criteria: 1. law enforcement officials confirm the abduction, 2. law enforcement officials determine that the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death, and 3. evidence (for example, a detailed description of the child, abductor, or involved vehicle) exists that may aid in the speedy recovery of the child. The specific criteria that activate the AMBER plan differ among the communities, states, and countries that implement the plan. Some U.S. states, New York for example, activate the plan only when the missing child is 17 years of age or younger.

Alert information is transmitted to area radio and television stations by the Emergency Alert System and is immediately broadcasted. Radio stations interrupt regular broadcasts and television and cable stations run an on-screen banner providing descriptions of the missing child, abductor, and/or the vehicle involved. Because many people listen to the radio while traveling by car, radio broadcasts of descriptions are particularly useful. Several children have been recovered when law enforcement agencies were tipped-off by drivers who identified the vehicle involved in the abduction. Recently, the AMBER Alert has expanded to include internet users.

AMBER Alert Net (www.amberalertnet.com/) is one of several new plans aiming to extend the reach of the AMBER Alert plan to computer users at work and home. With the installation of a free software program, internet users receive automatic bulletins when the plan is activated and can print or forward messages. America Online (AOL/ www.aol.com) also offers a free version of the AMBER Alert plan that provides information via PCs, pagers, and cell phones to anyone who signs up for the AMBER Alert service. During the first month of the AOL plan, over 70,000 users enrolled. AOL users provide their zip codes (the company encourages users to provide both home and work zip codes) and AOL targets the AMBER Alert messages geographically. The recent addition of these online alert sources greatly increases the reach of the AMBER Alert plan.

Today, there are 74 states, counties, and cities with AMBER Alert plans. Over forty-four children are home, recovered safely from their abductors because of the AMBER Alert Plan. In January, 2003, the National AMBER Alert



Network Act of 2003 (HR 412) was passed by the U.S. legislature. The legislation establishes an AMBER Alert coordinator within the U.S. Justice Department and provides government funding for AMBER plan training and equipment as well aid in the coordination of AMBER plans at the state and local level. Across the United States and in many other countries, the AMBER Alert plan is saving children. Senator Dianne Feinstein (Democrat-CA) reports that

California's AMBER plan aided in the recovery of 20 victims during its first six months of implementation. Around the world, Amber Hagerman's legacy is helping to recover abducted children, return run-aways to their families, and locate missing Alzheimer's patients. For many children, the plan may mean the difference between life and death. It came too late for Amber, but maybe, hopefully, not too late for the children abducted today and in the future.