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NEWS



Murray Wood's son and daughter were abducted by their mother in November 2004 and he hasn't seen them since. A fundraiser will be held April 5 to help with his legal battle to win them back. Jason Lang/Richmond News

Father fortifies fight for kids

By Michelle Hopkins

In a couple of months, Murray Wood's son, Takara, will turn 12.

An important milestone to be sure, yet the Errington elementary teacher won't be able to celebrate with his son.

That's because Takara and his nine-year-old sister, Manami, were abducted by their noncustodial mother Ayako Wood in November 2004 on the pretense of taking the children to visit their dying grandfather in Japan.

Wood hasn't seen his children or heard their voices since.

Since that fateful day, Wood - who was awarded full custody of both children in B.C. Supreme Court - has tirelessly championed to get his children back. He has appeared countless times in Japanese courtrooms to get his children back, or at the very least see them. Wood, however, is stonewalled at every turn because Japanese courts refuse to recognize foreign custody orders. Japan isn't a signatory to the Hague Convention, which stipulates that the "rights of custody and of access under the law of one Contracting State are effectively respected in the other Contracting State."



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And despite his Canadian court order, the Saitama Family Court granted full custody to Ayako in April 2005 largely on the statement of their son that he wishes to stay in Japan.

"The Japanese family court appointed a researcher who interviewed the children's teachers and the children and bottom line, she reported the kids are happy here and should stay here," says a frustrated Wood. "We had a child psychologist write a report and she stated that the damage done to kids when not allowed to see a parent are many, including that they will start to feel unloved, abandoned and worthless."

Besides granting custody to their mother, Japanese courts also tend not to grant visitation to noncustodial parents.

"The philosophy in Japan is that children can't have two separate families," says Wood. "There's no evidence to support their contention, which is based on Japanese history that says when a woman enters into marriage she is struck from her own family records.

"In effect what the Japanese courts are doing is denying my children's Canadian heritage."

There needs to be sweeping changes made to Japanese courts, adds a passionate Wood.

"Society has a responsibility to step up and take children's rights into account."

Wood's children are like hundreds of other Canadian children abducted by a parent in foreign countries that aren't signatories to the Hague Convention. In Wood's case, his lawyers have pointed out that Manami, unlike her mother, doesn't have dual citizenship.

"We never got around to registering her Japanese citizenship, so I'd really like to know who issued her (Ayako) Japanese travel documents to get my daughter out of Canada," says Wood.

There is a Canadian warrant out for Ayako's arrest.

"Ideally, I'd like to see her returned to Canada to face charges and see the kids back home," says Wood. "I don't have any interest in seeing her thrown in jail ... I just want my kids back."

Meanwhile, the cost to fight this long, drawn-out legal battle is astronomical. Wood has spent more than \$100,000 in an attempt to get the Japanese courts to overturn their decision and give him full custody of Takara and Manami.

To help other parents facing the same cruel fate, Wood's father has just established the nonprofit International Rights of Children Society (join at www.iros.org). The website was founded to support other families facing similar difficulties and raise awareness of their plight.

Meanwhile, Wood is hosting a fundraiser at the Richmond Winter Club on Wednesday, April 5, starting at 3:45 p.m. Wood, along with other guest speakers, will talk about what they consider a human rights issue. Everyone is invited to attend. Tickets are \$20 or \$40, which includes membership to the society. For information, phone Wood at 604-875-1640 or at Errington school at 604-668-6699.

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