



Child Recovery Australia spokesperson Col Chapman has been criticised for his company's methods of operation.

Szonert had moved with Griffin to Kuala Lumpur to live with Crick in August 2015. He says he asked her to leave because of personal issues – a claim she denies. After snatching Griffin, Szonert went on the run with her son for more than three weeks, before all parties returned to Australia to resolve the custody dispute. Griffin is now living with his father in Kuala Lumpur; Szonert remains in Australia.

Crick is damning of the actions by Child Recovery Australia and disagrees with the term “child recovery”. “The clear implication, by calling it a recovery, was that I had done something wrong and abducted my child in the first place,” he says. “But these guys kidnapped my son from my legal care, without checking [the] facts.

“For every case they may get right, they will get many more horribly wrong. What gives anybody a right to be the judge and jury, and do that to a child or parent? These people are thugs for hire and this industry should be shut down.”

Col Chapman, a spokesperson for Child Recovery Australia, defends his company's action, claiming he only acts for clients backed by court orders. Chapman believes he's recovered more than 100 kids, and says demand has doubled in the past decade, as he works on about a dozen international cases a year. “The majority of our work has come from cross-cultural relationships that have broken down. My phone used to ring 10 times a week, now it's 30.”

His fees vary depending on the child's location, from about \$15,000 in the Oceania region to \$100,000 in Europe and South America. He says he pockets about \$1000 in each case – the lion's share covers costs such as transport and surveillance. “There is no greater gift than giving a parent back the child they thought they had lost,” he says. Still, some of his methods have attracted criticism.

In Trinidad in 2008, Chapman slipped a sedative into a soft drink can that was given to a nine-year-old girl to keep her relaxed during a recovery operation. He says it was a mild prescription drug and that he had her father's permission. “Some people argue about our tactics, but imagine life without your kids. How far would you go?” he asks.

Not all recoveries from Lebanon fail so spectacularly, as in Faulkner's case. In December 2008, a 26-year-old Norwegian woman named Sylvia* was studying in Australia when she fell in love with an Australian-Lebanese man in Sydney. Their daughter, Lucinda*, was born a year later. Sylvia says when her relationship broke down over religious differences, it was agreed she would move back to Norway with Lucinda.

A month before their scheduled departure, Lucinda's father stole their daughter abroad to Lebanon. Sylvia hired ABP, who tracked them to a village in the country's north, then concocted a plan to recover Lucinda. Sylvia told her former partner that she wanted them to live together in Australia.

In February 2013, she met him and Lucinda at a cafe in Lebanon to discuss arrangements. Sylvia took Lucinda to

the toilet, leaving behind a handbag and luggage stuffed with clothes to fool her former partner. While he waited, she carried her daughter from the toilet through a conference room, into a stairwell and out an emergency exit. “I said, ‘We're going to Norway on a surprise trip’, and she smiled,” explains Sylvia. “My adrenaline went from zero to 100 in one minute. I didn't stop to think. I just grabbed her and went.”

Waiting with a car were child recovery agents. Sylvia and Lucinda were driven to a safe house nearby and the next morning they boarded a boat to Cyprus. “On the boat, there was still a chance that someone could come and get us, so I was looking off to the sides and behind us all the time,” says Sylvia. “But when we got close to Cyprus, I didn't look back. It was like everything in my life had been on hold for eight months and suddenly my life was back. I remember holding my daughter and saying, ‘We are going home.’”

Lucinda has had no contact with her father since fleeing Lebanon. Twice a year, Sylvia sends him photos and news of their daughter. “I believe he loves her and could have been a great father if he hadn't done what he did,” she says.

She refers to herself as one of the “lucky ones”. The sad case of Faulkner – who reportedly had to sign away her custody rights in Lebanon as a condition of her prison release – illustrates the risks of child recovery operations, says Sylvia. “There are so many people who end up losing their kids. I remember thinking, ‘I have one shot. If we fail, that is it.’”

Patricia Nunez is taking a different tack. Her sons, nine-year-old ▷

THE AFTERMATH

Since Sally Faulkner arrived home with the *60 Minutes* crew by her side but without her children, Lahela and Noah, she's had no contact with the kids she left behind.

