

Family That Left US for Religious Reasons Rescued After 3 Months at Sea

An Arizona family that left the country over what they consider government interference in religion was rescued Friday after being lost at sea for nearly three months, a report from the Associated Press says.

The Gastonguays left their home in Ash Fork, Ariz., in November and moved to San Diego, where they lived on their boat as they prepared to sail to the Polynesian island nation of Kiribati. They set sail for the island nation located more than 3,000 miles from the U.S. coastline in May.

Just weeks into their journey, the Gastonguays hit a series of storms that damaged their small boat and left them floating for weeks without making progress. They were eventually picked up by a Venezuelan fishing vessel, transferred to a Japanese cargo ship and taken to Chile, where they were expected to fly home on flights booked by the U.S. State Department.

The Chilean newspaper *Las Ultimas Noticias* reported the story of their arrival.

"They were looking for a kind of adventure; they wanted to live on a Polynesian island but they didn't have sufficient expertise to navigate adequately," police prefect Jose Luis Lopez, who took the family's statement in San Antonio, Chile, told the newspaper.

Kiribati is a group of islands just off the equator and the international dateline about halfway between Hawaii and Australia. There are just over 100,000 people of primarily Micronesian descent who live there. The nation, which is 96 percent Christian, has a long history with missionaries.

According to the AP, Hannah Gastonguay, 26, said her family was fed up with government control over the U.S. As Christians, they don't believe in "abortion, homosexuality, in the state-controlled church," she said. She also said they had a problem with being "forced to pay these taxes that pay for abortions we don't agree with."

Though the family did not belong to a church, Hannah Gastonguay said their faith came from reading the Bible and through prayer.

"The Bible is pretty clear," she said.

Hannah, her 30-year-old husband Sean, his father Mike, and the couple's daughters—3-year-old Ardith and 8-month-old Rahab—set sail in May. Hannah said they didn't touch land again for 91 days.

She said at first, "We were cruising." But within a couple of weeks, "when we came out there, storm, storm, storm."

The family decided to set course for the Marquesas Islands but instead found themselves in a "twilight zone," taking on more and more damage.

They had been on the ocean for about two months and were running out of supplies. They had no food and were down to "some juice and some honey," Hannah said. They were able to catch fish but didn't see any boats.

Still, Hannah said, "[We] didn't feel like we were going to die or anything. We believed God would see us through."

She added, "We were in the thick of it, but we prayed. Being out on that boat, I just knew I was going to see some miracles."

Their boat was eventually spotted by a helicopter that had taken off from a nearby Venezuelan fishing vessel, where they stayed for about five days before transferring to a Japanese

cargo ship. They were on that ship for nearly three weeks before landing in Chile last week.

Jimmy Gastonguay, Sean's brother, said he had given a description of the family's vessel to the U.S. Coast Guard and exchanged emails with them once the family was picked up by the first boat.

"There was some concern, but we were hoping for the best, and they eventually popped up," he said. "We're all happy. We have good peace of mind now."

Hannah Gastonguay said her family will now return to Arizona and "come up with a new plan."