

Ohio Women Freed From Abduction Release 'Thank You' Video

Three young Ohio women freed two months ago from a decade of captivity in the home of a former school bus driver spoke publicly for the first time since their ordeal in a video released early on Tuesday thanking supporters and loved ones.

The video was filmed last week in the offices of the law firm managing a trust fund established for the three women, who took turns in separate appearances before the camera to express gratitude for donations to the fund and for a chance to rebuild their lives.

Organizers said the Cleveland Courage Fund has grown to more than \$1 million as of July 2, with over 9,200 individuals making contributions.

The 3 1/2-minute long video () marked the first sustained glimpse of all three women—Amanda Berry, 27, Gina DeJesus, 23, and Michelle Knight, 32—since they were rescued on May 6.

Ariel Castro, fired last fall from his job as a Cleveland school bus driver, has been charged with kidnapping the three victims between 2002 and 2004 and brutalizing them while holding them captive in his house over the next 10 years.

Officials said the three women were kept bound for periods of time in chains or rope and that they endured starvation, beatings and sexual assaults. One of them, Knight, was said to have suffered several miscarriages deliberately induced by her captor, for which Castro has been charged with murder.

Explaining the reason for the video's release, Knight's lawyer, Kathy Joseph, said, "People are recognizing them now as they go about in public, so they decided to put voices and faces to their heartfelt messages."

Berry, rescued along with the 6-year-old daughter she bore during her captivity, spoke first, reading from a short statement that thanked family and friends and concluded by asking that “everyone respect our privacy and give us time to have a normal life.”

DeJesus appeared next, stating simply: “I would say thank you for your support.” Her father and mother also spoke briefly.

The video was capped by a lengthier statement from Knight, who said she wanted “everyone to know that [she’s] doing just fine.”

“I may have been through hell and back, but I’m strong enough to walk through hell with a smile on my face, and with my head held high, and my feet firmly on the ground,” she said, adding she was determined not to “let the situation define who I am.”

Castro, who turns 53 on Wednesday, is scheduled to return to a downtown Cleveland courtroom on July 24. A judge ruled last week that he was competent to stand trial on 329 criminal counts, including charges of kidnapping, rape and aggravated murder.

(Editing by Steve Gorman)