Mother’s negotiations led pirates to free journalist

Redondo Beach woman worked quietly to free son taken hostage in 2012.

BY JAMES RAINNEY AND RUBEN VIVAS

The first phone call joined the modest Redondo Beach townhouse in the middle of the night. Many others like it would follow, for nearly three years. The voices on the other end of the line would vary, but all were insistent — turn over millions of dollars or you will never see your son again.

It was a mother’s burden to field the calls and do anything she could to try to save her son, kidnapped journalist Michael Scott Moore. Marlis Saunders answered the phone time after time, and made calls of her own to the Somali pirates who were holding her son in one of the world’s most lawless areas.

The faceless captors showed no sign of backing down until two months ago, when something changed. They suddenly gave up their most outrageous ransom demand and began to bargain. Saunders said she finally felt reason for hope.

When her son’s freedom finally came this week, his colleagues said it was owed to a mother’s resilience and [See Hostage, All]

[Hostage, from All]

resolve — along with the delivery of a smaller, unspecified payoff.

Freed on Tuesday after 32 months of captivity, Moore flew to Kenya and planned to travel to Berlin this weekend. The young man who learned to surf in the South Bay and turned that passion into novels about surfing and foreign cultures planned to be reunited with his mother. It was a ray of good news after the recent beheadings in Syria of two American journalists by Muslim extremists.

"I am just overjoyed," Saunders said Thursday in her first interview about the long ordeal. "I am ecstatic."

She said her son, who has joint German and American citizenship, told her that he would spend some time in Berlin before returning to the South Bay, where he attended Mira Costa High School and began writing for the school newspaper.

"I’m not healthy but I am safe,” Moore, 45, said in a statement. "It’s an astonishing story, but right now I have to recover my wits and spend time with family and friends." Moore asked journalists to give him some space for now, and his mother said she preferred to do the same.

The journalist’s odyssey began Jan. 31, 2012, in the town of Gallggooye, where he was nearing the end of a month of research on the pirates who do much of their work in the waters around the Horn of Africa.

Moore had been to Somalia before and was traveling this time with a $12,000 grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, which finances journalism on under-reported issues. He planned magazine articles and a book because he felt people in the West did not know enough about the troubled country and the conditions driving the kidnappers.

The veteran journalist had a team of locals guiding and protecting him, but his colleagues later reported
They were thinking all through the night that the weather was bad, that the storm would prevent them from getting away. But after they got to the airport, they waited for hours for the plane to arrive. At last it did, and they were able to fly back to the States.

The case drew more attention than ever. The public was eager to hear the details of the story. What had happened? Why had they been held? What was the government doing to help?

It was a difficult time for everyone involved. The families of the hostages were worried and anxious. The government was under pressure to act quickly and effectively. And the terrorists were keeping the world in suspense, waiting to see what would happen next.