

PHILADELPHIA

# DAILY NEWS

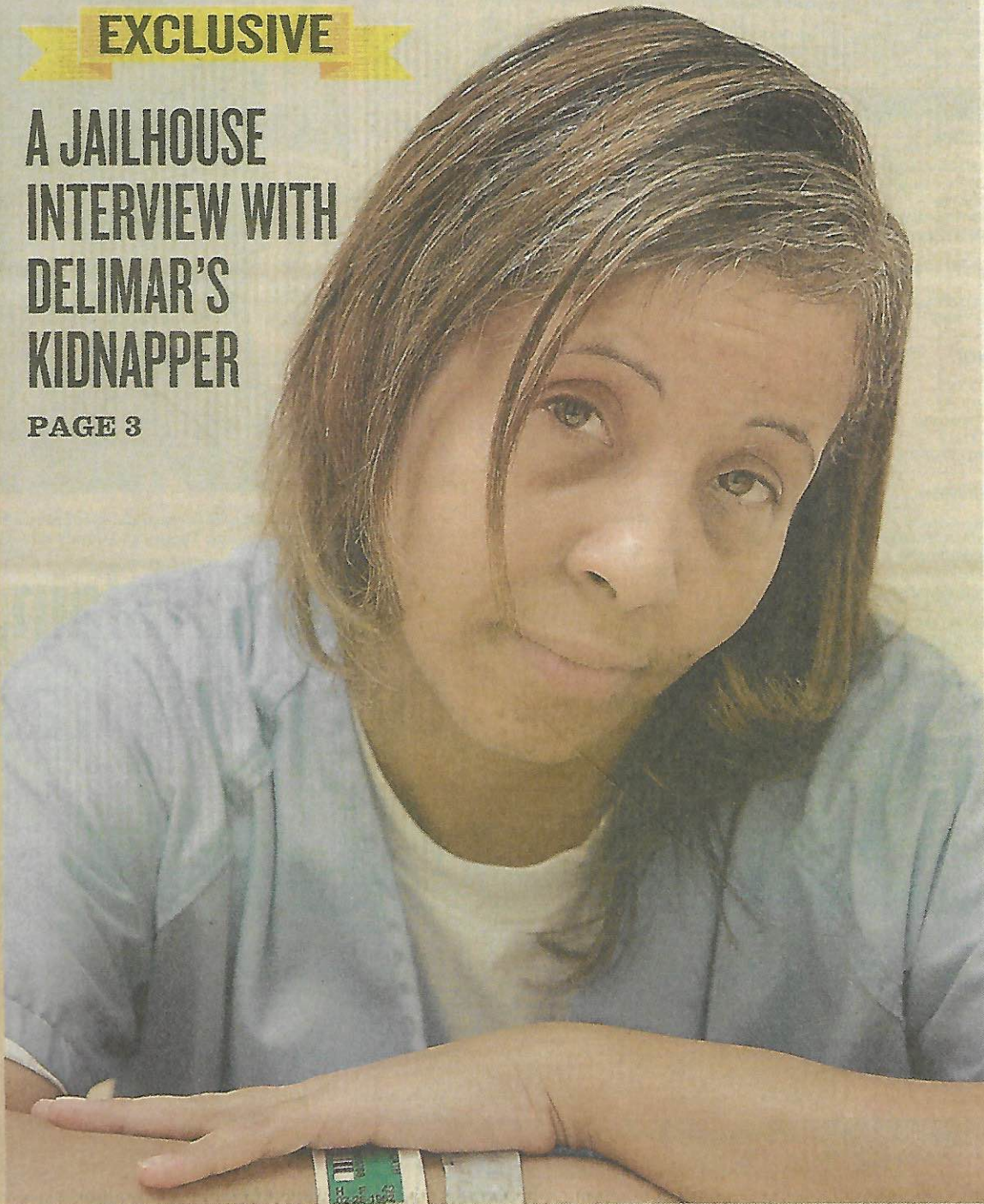
THE PEOPLE PAPER

# I'M NO MONSTER

**EXCLUSIVE**

**A JAILHOUSE  
INTERVIEW WITH  
DELIMAR'S  
KIDNAPPER**

**PAGE 3**



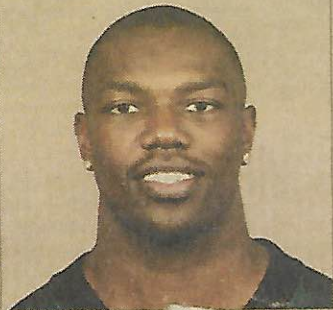
**C. DELORES  
TUCKER DIES**

**PAGE 6**



**HOLDING OUT  
FOR T.O.'S  
NEXT STUNT**

**HOFMANN, PAGE 94**





I'M NO MONSTER

# Her side of the story

## Kidnapper says Delimar filled her 'emptiness'

By NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN  
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**C**AROLYN CORREA, the woman convicted of kidnapping 10-day-old Delimar Vera and raising her as her own child, wants the world to know one thing: She is not a monster.

"I just feel I got the bad end of the stick," she said during a recent prison interview. "They put me out there to be a monster, but I am a loving person. If I could do something for you, I'd do it. I could have two soups in my bins — and even though I know I have

raising the baby to age 6, being discovered at a neighborhood birthday party — is a tale of mystery and blame, of asking no questions, of filling an aching need for a child's love. She sticks steadfastly to her story, ensuring that the heart-tugging drama that captured world attention will continue to be plagued by unanswered questions.

Correa, 43, still won't admit she did anything wrong in the Delimar crime. She blames Pedro Vera, Delimar's biological father, saying Vera handed her the newborn in December 1997. She said she has no idea why.

He never told her. She never asked.

"I've thought about it — why didn't I question it?" she said. "But it made my emptiness go away."

What's more, she said Delimar's natural mother watched as Vera handed over the newborn after the fire broke out. Later, outside the fire scene, she said the mother again saw her holding the baby.

Correa speaks convincingly, with no hint of the dark pathology that swirls around the kidnapping. Even those who were fooled by her, like Andre Moore — who thought for many years that he

"I'll always think about Aaliyah. No one can take away what I feel. She's always going to be in my heart. I will always love her. I also want her to know — I did not take her."

CAROLYN CORREA (left)

to eat tomorrow — I'd give away that soup."

Correa answered questions in a soft, sweet voice for three hours during an interview at Riverside Correctional Facility in Northeast Philadelphia. She spoke briefly in court last month before she received her nine-to-30-year sentence for kidnapping, but her prison interview is the only time she has spoken publicly extensively about the crime.

Her lawyers, Jeffrey Zucker and Saul Steinberg, say they believe Correa's story and are appealing her sentence.

Correa's tale of the kidnapping — the alleged arson cover-up,

### What's happened

**Dec. 1997:** 10-day-old Delimar Vera is presumed dead in Feltonville fire. ▼



**Jan. 2004:** Luzaida Cuevas spots girl, 6, she believes is her dead daughter at birthday party.

**Feb. 2004:** DNA tests confirm Aaliyah Hernandez is Delimar Vera. She is returned to custody of birth mother.

**March 2004:** Carolyn Correa surrenders to face charge that she torched home to conceal taking Delimar.

Charge would later be dismissed.

**March 2004:** Parents sign six-figure movie/book deal.

**April 2004:** Correa charged with kidnapping Delimar.

**Feb. 2005:** Correa pleads no contest, meaning she won't refute charges.

**July 2005:** Cuevas sues city for botched fire probe.

Delimar's father, Pedro Cuevas, sues a few months later.

**Sept. 2005:** Correa is sentenced to 9 to 30 years for abduction.



JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News

See CORREA Next Page



# I'M NO MONSTER

## CORREA

Continued from Preceding Page

will always love her. I also want her to know — I did not take her.”

Two days before the fire, Correa said, Vera called her Willingboro home to speak to his uncle, Raymond Vera, who is Correa's stepfather, to ask if he was going to play dominoes in Trenton. She said Pedro Vera asked her what she was doing.

“Nothing. I think I lost my baby,” she said she told him. “And he said, ‘Everything is going to be OK.’”

He didn't elaborate. She didn't ask him to.

Instead, she asked Vera to fix the headlight on her car. He told her to bring the car to Philadelphia.

Correa now admits her tangle of lies quickly turned the truth into a knotted mess. She still says she gave birth to a stillborn baby, but her medical records from the time show no sign of pregnancy or stillbirth.

She got to Vera's house after dark, too late for him to fix her headlight. They agreed she would return after work the following day.

On Dec. 15, she arrived at the home on Hurley Street near Whitaker in Feltonville about 5 p.m., according to her story. She said she spoke for a few minutes with Luzaida Cuevas, who held a baby in her lap. For a few minutes, Correa said, she held the baby, then handed her back to Cuevas.

Correa said Vera's mother, who is now dead, also was there.

Vera wanted Correa to leave, saying he needed her to talk to her friend about a job for him. She said he really wanted her to drive him to buy drugs, then drive him back home.

“I waited outside in my car,” she said. “He comes outside with the baby in his arms. Luzaida was standing at the door. I already had a car seat in the car because of my being pregnant, so he put her in that.”

Vera then climbed into the car. Correa said “a girl with black hair” walked up, cursing at Vera and screaming, “What about the baby?”

Vera asked Correa to give the irate woman a ride. Correa said they dropped her at a bar in Hunting Park, then drove to the home of another of Vera's friends.

At that point, Correa said she re-



JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News

alized she had forgotten her purse at the Hurley Street house.

She said she left Vera and drove back to Hurley Street. The baby was still strapped in the car seat.

Correa said she double-parked, put on the car's emergency flashers, locked the doors and ran up the steps to Vera's house.

“His mother was standing in the doorway and said she smelt smoke,” Correa said. “She was worried about the children. I helped her take the kids out. She said, ‘Go get Pedro.’ Then Luzaida came up, in a car, and started yelling, ‘My kids!’”

“She tried to get in the house but couldn't. That's when her face got burned.”

Correa said she drove back to where she had left Vera and told him the house was on fire. He jumped in the car with her, she said.

“All the way there he said, ‘It's my fault. I cut the wires in the heater and did something,’” she said.

He asked her to drop him off about a half-block from his house.

“Why don't you go home. Take

the baby,” she said Pedro told her.

She said she told him she wanted to make sure everyone was OK at the fire. She drove closer to the scene, locked the door of the car with the baby inside. She said she saw Luzaida Cuevas sitting in the back of an ambulance. The image was captured by TV crews.

“I asked her if she was OK,” Correa said. “Not once did she say anything about the baby. All she was worried about was the burn on her face.”

Cuevas' story about that night was vastly different, according to court records.

During Correa's initial visit, according to Cuevas' story, Correa went upstairs to use the bathroom, then left the house. Cuevas said she later checked on baby Delimar and discovered she'd been moved from the bed into a crib next to the door of the front bedroom.

Correa later told police that she moved the baby because “she could have fallen off the bed.”

Correa returned a short while later to get her purse, according to Cuevas' story. Not long after

that, Cuevas said she heard an explosion upstairs.

She said she found a fire in the bedroom where Delimar had been sleeping, but couldn't find the infant.

Fire investigators later told her the baby was incinerated in the blaze.

Cuevas' lawyer said Correa's story that Cuevas wasn't even home when the fire broke out is “a

**“I believe I saved her and she saved me. I believe that somebody else could have had her and treated her bad. And she saved me because I'd lost my child.”**

## CAROLYN CORREA

complete fabrication.”

Correa said she stayed at the fire scene for a short while, then decided to leave.

With the baby:

“I took her home, laid down next to her, and played with her,” Correa said. “From then on, she was mine. And no one questioned it.”

She said she began telling people that she gave birth at home, assisted by a family friend.

Prison has changed Carolyn Correa. Her hair is going gray. Pounds have fallen from her 5-foot-1 frame. She's now weighs 128.

She's getting steady psychiatric care and takes a medication called Celexa that regulates mood swings that have plagued her adult life.

The psychiatric care also helps fill in blank spots in her memory. She said the blank spots began about the time she had a tubal ligation in 1990. She said that didn't prevent five more pregnancies, none of which resulted in a baby.

The fourth was in 1997, a few days before the kidnapping. On Dec. 3 she said she felt pain in her side. She went to a local emergency room and told doctors she was possibly pregnant with three positive home pregnancy tests, according to testimony at Correa's

April 2004 preliminary hearing. Technicians performed an ultrasound test, but found no evidence of a pregnancy.

Correa still insists she was pregnant. And she still believes she miscarried about nine days later when she saw “blood clots” and “chunks” come out while she was home alone.

“I know what I felt,” she said. “I had a belly and all the symptoms of a pregnant woman.”

Elliot Atkins, a forensic psychologist hired by Correa's attorneys, believes Correa suffered “pseudocyesis,” a condition in which a woman falsely believes she is pregnant.

Once Correa had Delimar home, she truly came to believe the child was her own, Atkins said. When authorities first questioned her about Delimar in February 2004, Correa was so confident the girl was her own daughter that she paid for her own DNA test.

Weeks later, the DNA test showed the child wasn't hers.

“If Aaliyah's not my baby,” Correa wailed to her best friend, “who has mine?”

Seventeen months after she was arrested, Correa said she was allowed to meet with Delimar at the Criminal Justice Center.

The reunion was nothing like Correa dreamed. A screen kept them from hugging. All the things Correa wanted to say she mostly couldn't.

“When you're used to having this kid around, this lovable child, it's hard when you can't hold her,” said Correa. “She did tell me she loved the way I took care of her. I took care of her very good.”

Gomez, the prosecutor, said Delimar asked for the meeting.

“It was an attempt to allow Delimar to confront Carolyn and to say goodbye, to allow Delimar to get closure in a relationship she had for six years,” Gomez said.

The meeting lasted about 45 minutes. Correa said she thinks about it every day.

“She's a child any mother would want. Very funny. Very pretty. Very loving,” she said.

“I believe I saved her and she saved me,” she said. “I believe that somebody else could have had her and treated her bad. And she saved me because I'd lost my child.” ★



# Some answers to the Delimar mystery

The Delimar drama still has many questions, some of which may never be answered. Among them:

**Q: Who was Carolyn Correa's accomplice?**

**A:** When Correa was arrested in March 2004, police said she committed the crime with an unnamed co-conspirator. No one has ever been charged.

**Q: What about the widely reported story that Luzaida**

**Cuevas thought her baby died in a fire, then saw a girl who looked like her daughter at a family party six years later?**

**A:** Cuevas told police she was at a family party in January 2004 and saw a familiar-looking girl named Aaliyah Hernandez, who was then 6. Cuevas said she snipped a lock of the girl's hair and had its DNA tested.

The woman who hosted the party has told the *Daily News* that Cuevas did not attend the party. The hostess said Cuevas

attended a party in January 2003. Cuevas later admitted through her attorney that the party was in 2003, but she never explained why she waited so long before going to the police about the kidnapping. Cuevas' lawsuit against the city also uses the January 2004 date for the party, again with no explanation.

**Q: What's the story with the fire at the Cuevas home on Hurley Street in December 1997?**

**A:** The fire has officially been

declared an accident, caused by a homemade extension cord attached to a space heater. Investigators said they found no evidence of arson at the time and have not changed their opinion.

After Cuevas reported the kidnapping, detectives theorized that the fire was intentionally set to cover up the crime. Finding no evidence to support the arson theory therefore raises fundamental questions about the kidnapping.

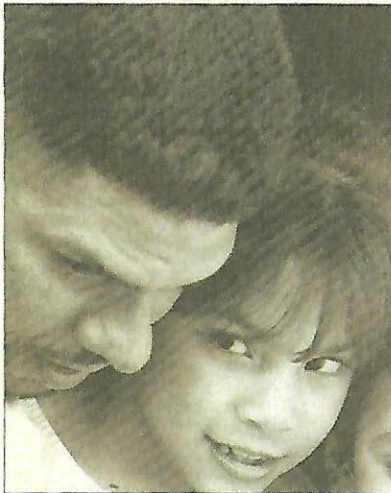
**Q: If Cuevas and the baby's**

**father, Pedro Vera, suspected that Correa had their baby, why didn't they do something?**

**A:** Correa says that Vera was at her Willingboro home several times during the six years she raised the child. Once, Correa says, Cuevas came to Correa's home and saw the child.

Pedro Vera's sister, who lived with Correa's family at one time, also has raised questions about why Cuevas and Pedro Vera didn't raise questions about the child earlier. ★

Pedro Vera and Delimar in March 2004.



Inquirer file

"I didn't do this by myself . . . I waited outside in my car. [Pedro Vera] comes outside with the baby in his arms. Luzaida was standing at the door. I already had a car seat in the car because of my being pregnant, so he put her in that."

CAROLYN CORREA



JENNIFER MIDDBERRY/Daily News file

Luzaida Cuevas shares a hug with Delimar in Cuevas' Northeast home in 2004.

## CORRECTION

A graphic in Tuesday's paper with a story on new housing units in Center City incorrectly reported the number of housing units projected in 2008. The correct figure is 824. A copy of the Center City District study can be found at [www.centercityphila.org](http://www.centercityphila.org).



When we've made an error, we'll say so. If we need to clarify a point, we'll do that as well, and we'll do so on this page. If you have a concern about our coverage, please call Lorenzo Biggs at 215-594-5030 or e-mail [ln@correction@phillynews.com](mailto:ln@correction@phillynews.com)

## CORREA

Continued from Preceding Page

had fathered baby Aaliyah with Correa — remain trapped in a puzzle of what and who to believe. "I still think there's a lot of loopholes that haven't been brought up," Moore said after Correa's sentencing last month. "Outside of everything, she took care of that child very well. I don't condone how she got that child and we'll never know how she got that child."

Correa also said Pedro Vera visited her Willingboro, N.J., home several times in the years after the fire. Once, she said, he arrived

with Luzaida Cuevas, Delimar's biological mother.

"Why is it that Pedro is not arrested?" Correa asked. "I didn't do this by myself. And he gave me the child. Why didn't he get the kid before? If he would have come and got her, it wouldn't hurt me as bad as it's hurting me now."

The kidnapping charge against Correa alleged that an unnamed conspirator helped. Assistant District Attorney Leslie Gomez cast doubt on Correa's claim that Vera is the conspirator. Gomez said the investigation into the accomplice's identity is continuing.

Vera's lawyer, Mike Luber, said Correa's story is "not worthy of

belief."

"This is a woman who is obviously a pathological liar," Luber said. "She has significant mental problems. Two of the psychiatrists have said she is mentally imbalanced and she obviously will say anything and do anything to avoid the music, so to speak. The one thing she hasn't said is the truth — who the real co-conspirator is."

Cuevas' lawyer, Anthony Cianfrani, said he knows nothing about Cuevas visiting Correa's home after the fire.

"To the best of my knowledge, that's completely untrue," he said.

Correa said she still misses Delimar.

"It's pretty hard, looking at pictures, remembering everything. Little things she used to do. Little school stuff. And I'm not there," she said. "I feel it's unfair I raised her for six years and — instead of saying I want my child back — saying, 'This woman kidnapped my kid.' Well, I didn't."

She still calls the girl Aaliyah. She thinks of her often.

"I'll always think about Aaliyah," she said. "No one can take away what I feel. She's always going to be in my heart. I

See **CORREA** Next Page