



BILLY SMITH II: CHRONICLE MEMORIES: Rhonda Tavey talks to the media with her attorney Todd Ward on Tuesday. "It's heartbreaking not to see them," Tavey said of the five children she was accused of kidnapping. "They were our life and still are."

Woman who took children of Katrina evacuee cleared

Grand jury doesn't indict her in kidnapping case

BY PEGGY OHARE
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

After escaping a criminal indictment Tuesday, a Houston woman said she hopes to resume contact with five children she had been accused of kidnapping.

Rhonda Laine Tavey, 44, said her "door is open" to the children she had cared for since Hurricane Katrina, as well as to their mother.

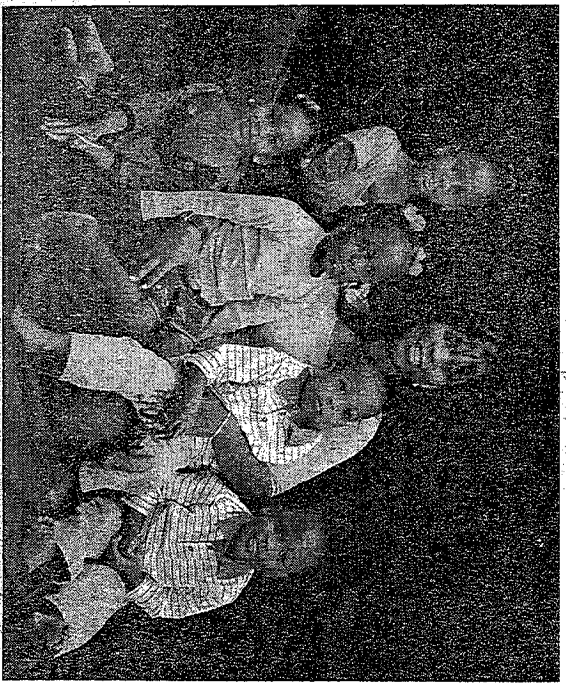
A Harris County grand jury declined to indict Tavey on five charges of kidnapping, finding there was not enough evidence to support her prosecution. And while Tavey has not seen by or spoken to the New Orleans family since her arrest more than two months ago, she believes she can still forge an amicable relationship with the children's mother, Erica Alphonse — even after bitter public mudslinging.

"It's heartbreaking not to see them," Tavey said at her attorney's office Tuesday. "They were our life and still are. And my door is open to them. They are welcome at my house anytime."

Tavey, who claimed she raised the children herself for three years with virtually no financial help from Alphonse or her family, had been accused in court documents of failing to return the siblings to their mother.

Tavey and the children, ranging from 2 to 8 years old, vanished July 11 when Alphonse tried to take the kids back.

The children were in fine condition when they were found Aug. 7 as officers arrested Tavey at a relative's northeast Houston home, the day after a nationwide Amber Alert was issued.



CHRONICLE FILE FAMILY: Erica Alphonse's five children vanished July 11 with Rhonda Tavey. The children were found Aug. 7 and returned to Alphonse. Tavey claimed she raised the children herself for three years.

and neglect. The agency returned the children to Alphonse.

'The dust needs to settle'

Tavey has since dismissed a court petition seeking custody of the children, but expressed disappointment in the CPS decision.

She was vague when asked if she would later renew the custody battle.

"Right now, the dust needs to settle," she said. "Everything needs to just settle from all this. And see where we go from there."

Alphonse, 24, could not be reached for comment Tuesday. Her attorney said Tavey appears unrepentant about the damning allegations she lodged against the children's mother.

"I personally find that a little troubling," said Houston attorney Shelley Ross. "I think Erica is an excellent parent. I've seen nothing suggesting otherwise."

Ross alleged Tavey made the accusations just to help her own legal defense.

"She appears to be inconsistent in many ways, let me just put it that way," he said.

Tavey said she did what she

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Mom jailed after 3 girls left alone in apartment

BY JENNIFER LEAHY
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

A Houston-area mother has been charged with child abandonment, accused of leaving her three young daughters alone overnight in their apartment while she was out drinking.

Harris County Pct. 4 deputy constables were called to the Applewood Village Apartments about 9:15 a.m. Tuesday after a neighbor reported hearing the girls, a 4-year-old and 1-year-old twins, cry all night Monday.

The girls had been left alone since about 10 p.m. Monday, said Harris County Pct. 4 Capt. Steve Whittion.

"At first we were concerned with the mother's welfare as well. Who would leave three young children alone for that long?" he said. "But she had left to go out drinking in Conroe."

Heather Lynn Vaughan, 27, told authorities someone was watching the children when she left, but she was unable to provide a name, Whittion said.

The apartment at 4500 Cypresswood was unclean, with a "sour smell," he said. "And obviously they hadn't been changed or fed in a long time."

The three sisters were evaluated at a hospital and then released to a relative.

"I think it surprises people that these are the number one complaint we investigate. About 40 to 41 percent of our cases are abandonment, the physical abuse cases are second," said Estrella Olguin, a spokeswoman for Child Protective Services.

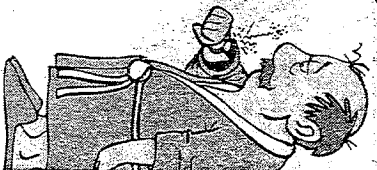
Vaughan is jailed on three charges of child abandonment, with bail at \$2,000 per charge.

Child abandonment is punishable by 180 days to two years in state jail and up to a \$10,000 fine if convicted, said Whittion.

CPS has no history with Vaughan and is investigating Olguin said.

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Feds combing TV chopper's wreckage for clues to crash

Investigators are combing the wreckage of a TV chopper that crashed in the Gulf of Mexico last week, looking for clues to what caused the crash.

man for the National Transportation Safety Board, worked in Miami and Garrett worked in Miami