

# Family of Warren Weinstein, U.S. citizen held by al-Qaeda, tries to ‘keep hoping’



Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post - From left, Alisa Weinstein, 40, her mom Elaine Weinstein, 70, and sister Jennifer Coakley, 42, in Rockville, Maryland. The family are waiting for the safe return of Warren Weinstein, 72, who has been held captive since August 2011 in Pakistan.

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By Ernesto Londoño, Published: December 31 [E-mail the writer](#)

When Elaine Weinstein’s phone rang at 10 p.m. that August night in 2011, she answered automatically, thinking it could only be her husband, who called every night from Pakistan to say good night.

“Warren has been kidnapped,” she heard her husband’s boss say.

## Video



In a videotaped plea to the president, secretary of state, the media and his family, U.S. government contractor Warren Weinstein is seen urging the Obama administration to negotiate for his release. Weinstein, 72, of Rockville, was kidnapped by al-Qaeda militants in Pakistan in 2011. The video was provided to The Washington Post in an anonymous email on Dec. 25.

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visiting. He wouldn’t just say, ‘Wish you were here.’ There was always a history lesson.”

During the early years, before there was e-mail or Skype, Warren Weinstein would ask homebound colleagues and travelers he ran into in remote areas to call his wife or knock on her door when they could, seeking to reassure her that he was doing well. When the girls were a bit older, the family moved to Africa, where Weinstein managed Peace Corps programs. He immersed himself into the culture and rhythm of each new place, fitting in almost like a local, relatives said.

It would be months before Warren Weinstein’s relatives realized the Rockville man had been taken hostage by al-Qaeda, making him the only U.S. citizen known to be held by the terrorist group.

The Montgomery County family has since grieved and prayed in silence, worried that raising Weinstein’s profile could put him in greater jeopardy. But after a video and handwritten note from the 72-year-old Weinstein emerged last week, his wife and daughters decided to plead publicly for his release for the first time and discuss the ordeal his relatives have endured for more than two years.

The message released on Christmas Day was the third Weinstein video distributed by al-Qaeda. Looking forlorn, sporting a scraggly gray beard and noticeably missing a tooth, Weinstein is recorded pleading with President Obama and Secretary of State John F. Kerry to make “hard choices” to secure his release.

“It just hurts,” Elaine Weinstein said. “It’s like he’s so close and I can’t get to him.”

For the family, each video brings an overwhelming mix of elation and raw terror.

“It’s very emotional being able to hear his voice,” the Weinsteins’ daughter Alisa, 40, said Tuesday in an interview, speaking alongside her mother and sister, Jennifer. “But it’s also realizing that we’re in the middle of something much bigger than us.”

Soon after getting a doctorate degree from Columbia University in 1970, Warren Weinstein got his first job as a development consultant overseas and fell in love with expatriate life in challenging places.

While his daughters were growing up, he took only short-term assignments that would not take him away from his family for long, or postings on which they could join him.

Weinstein turned postcard writing into an art, sending his wife and daughters carefully written dispatches from every new place he visited.

“We have oodles and oodles of postcards,” Alisa Weinstein said. “There was usually a story that had to do with the place he was

visiting. He wouldn’t just say, ‘Wish you were here.’ There was always a history lesson.”

His job in Pakistan, where he was country director for J.E. Austin Associates, a development firm, was a dream come true, his wife and daughters said. He quickly fell in love with the country and its people, feeling so safe and welcome that he did not think twice about taking his visiting wife and daughter Alisa to remote villages, where they saw his work promoting the dairy industry and agriculture.

Weinstein was kidnapped just days before he was scheduled to leave Pakistan. As he was packing up, he told Alisa that he had mixed feelings about departing. He was eager to spend more time at home with his two grandchildren but sad to close a fulfilling chapter of his life.

“It’s wrenching for me to leave here,” he told his daughter over a Gmail chat. “This place has become home.”

After Weinstein was taken hostage, Jennifer Coakley, Weinstein’s other daughter, had to find a subtle way to explain to her daughter, then in elementary school, why Grandpa was no longer calling regularly on Skype to say hello. Her daughter had some tough questions no one could answer: Do they let him eat? Is he clean? Can he go outside?

Government officials have told the family they are doing everything in their power to bring Weinstein back, but his wife and daughters have not been given detailed information about the investigation into his kidnapping.

“We keep being told that everything that can be done is being done,” said Coakley, 42. “This is a man who spent his whole life serving people and devoted all his time and energy to helping people.”

In exchange for Weinstein’s release, al-Qaeda has demanded that the United States halt airstrikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen. It has also asked for the release of al-Qaeda and Taliban members in U.S. custody. The Obama administration has said it will not negotiate with al-Qaeda.

“We’ve long said we don’t make concessions to people who kidnap U.S. citizens,” Marie Harf, a State Department spokeswoman, said this week.

Christopher Voss, a former FBI agent who has worked on high-profile kidnapping investigations, said the latest message appeared to represent an effort by al-Qaeda to raise the profile of their captive.

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“Al-Qaeda is frustrated,” said Voss, a managing director at Insite Security, a firm that offers advice in kidnapping cases. “They don’t do proof-of-life videos unless they are trying to engage in a negotiation. They have a commodity that they feel is worth something, but no buyers.”

Unlike past hostage videos released by al-Qaeda, the latest from Weinstein did not include any overt threats, such as gunmen by his side, or warnings that he would be executed.

Within the circumstances, Voss said, the kidnappers appear to be attempting to “make themselves to look like they’re reasonable and humanitarian.”

Weinstein’s latest message contained a request experts in kidnappings called unprecedented. He said his captors were willing to let his family visit him in captivity if the Obama administration began releasing prisoners. That was a sure sign that the message was carefully scripted by al-Qaeda, said Rita Katz, the director of the Site Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist propaganda.

“Where would they visit him?” she said. “Pakistan? With al-Qaeda fighters standing by him? Extremely unlikely he would propose such a thing and put them in harm’s way.”

Weinstein’s wife said she holds out hope that her husband will return soon. She is never away from her phone. She keeps a toiletry bag packed in her bathroom, thinking it will save time if she ever has to run out on a moment’s notice to meet him.

The family has tried to remain strong during the holidays and the milestones Weinstein has missed. He was not there for his 45th anniversary or his wife’s 70th birthday, which the family chose to mark with a low-key dinner.

“When I’m about to lose hope, I think about him and what he would want us to do,” Alisa said.

“He would want us to keep hoping,” her sister said. “He’s the eternal optimist.”