

# Mexican relishes hunt for U.S. fugitives

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MEXICALI, Mexico --

It's a Hollywood theme older than "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and as recent as "Thelma & Louise." Flee south of the border to escape the law.

Alfredo Arenas Moreno's mission is to convince fugitives that Mexico is no hiding place, despite what the movies say.

Exhibit A: a Nebraska teacher he caught on charges of fleeing the U.S. with a 13-year-old student she was suspected of having sex with.

"They still have this image in their minds of the old Western movies, when the desperate would come to Mexico and find a haven," he says. "That no longer works."

Arenas, 47, heads the Baja California state police department's international liaison unit, whose only jobs are to provide security for visiting celebrities and hunt down people on the run. He says his unit captured 195 U.S. fugitives since 2001, including accused murderers, rapists and child abusers.

Arenas used a GPS tracker to find Kelsey Peterson, 25, in her car Nov. 2 in the parking lot of a shopping mall in this border city. The teacher was turned over to U.S. authorities to face federal charges of transporting a child across state lines for sexual activity, ending a weeklong search, and agreed Wednesday to be extradited from California to Nebraska.

Arenas released the boy, an illegal immigrant, to relatives who live in Yuma, Ariz. The eighth-grader told The Associated Press in Mexico that he had sexual intercourse with the teacher, whom he called his best friend, and that the pair went to Mexico to "get away for a while."

Arenas said Peterson entered Tijuana, Mexico, from San Diego with a car full of clothing, bottled water, toiletries, family photos, Disney DVDs and her dog, Miley.

"She drove down here planning on trying to blend in," Arenas said in his cramped office, where walls are covered with Spanish-language posters of Hollywood action movies, framed commendations from U.S. law enforcement agencies and photos of him with Arnold Schwarzenegger, Al Gore, Luciano Pavarotti and other visitors who have relied on his protection while in Mexico.

Arenas received a tip from the FBI that Peterson and the boy were staying in a Mexicali hotel Nov. 2, a national holiday for the Day of the Dead. Arenas arrived too late.

The FBI agent, Mike Eckel, called later with a tip that the boy's relatives in Yuma agreed to deliver money to the pair at the Mexicali mall at 4:30 p.m. Arenas used the GPS system on the pair's cell phone to pinpoint the spot. He saw the boy standing 10 feet from the white 2006 Pontiac G6; Peterson was sitting inside.

Peterson initially denied she was on the run but soon relented, Arenas said.

Arenas said he questioned the two until nearly midnight as he waited for the FBI and the boy's relatives. The boy sat on the opposite end of a long table at the police station as his former teacher professed her love for him, acknowledged a sexual relationship and said she had no regrets.

As Peterson and the boy parted, she said she would "always love him in her heart," Arenas said.

Peterson's attorney, Diane Regan, declined to comment on the charges but said her client was nice, compassionate and "a bit naive." Peterson was denied bail.

Peter Nunez, a former U.S. attorney in San Diego, said Peterson's statements to Arenas would need to be voluntary and the Mexican official would have to testify for them to make it into court.

Peterson did not meet with a consular official as international law requires. Nunez said that would not prevent her statements from getting into court, though defense attorneys have been trying to change that practice.

Peterson isn't the only high-profile fugitive Arenas has collared.

He caught a former Roman Catholic priest, Joseph Briceno, who pleaded guilty last year in Arizona to sexually abusing a teen more than 20 years ago. Arenas said an Internet address led to a Mexicali church, where the man was soliciting child pornography.

Acting on a tip from a nun who saw a wanted poster, Arenas captured Fernando Aguero in 2005 at a shelter in Ensenada, where he had fled with an 8-year-old girl from Fernley, Nev. Arenas said the man is serving a 15-year sentence in a Mexican prison for kidnapping.

His team of agents - three in Mexicali and two in Tijuana - is now pursuing about a dozen cases in the state, which straddles California's border with Mexico and extends south to secluded beach towns. He said he is closing in on an accused child molester from Orange County, Calif., who is hiding in Tijuana.

Arenas' U.S. counterparts call him a tireless partner.

"There are no boundaries," said Eckel of the FBI's San Diego office, who traded a blizzard of phone calls with Arenas to capture Peterson. "We call each other at all hours - day, night, holidays."

Antonio Cruz Jr., the Border Patrol's international liaison officer in El Centro, Calif., often calls on Arenas to disperse crowds of Mexicans who hurl rocks over the border at U.S. agents - even though it's not part of Arenas' job.

"He's always there for me, always quick to help," Cruz said. "If I want to trust anyone (in Mexican government), he would be the one."

Arenas, who stands 6-foot-4, weighs 245 pounds and sports a gray goatee, revels in tough talk. He says fugitives squirm at the prospect of spending time behind bars in Mexico.

"Mexican jails are real jails; we don't send you to the dentist if you have a toothache," he said. "U.S. jails are like Holiday Inns - air conditioning, cable TV, three meals a day."

He also shows a softer side. As he parted with Peterson, he told her that her dog would likely die in a Mexican animal shelter. She wept, and he pitied her.

Arenas took the dog to his house and plans to keep it.