

# Hundreds at vigil pray for missing 3-year-old

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



Photos by Robin Jerstad / Staff photographer

Riaz Sardar Khil lights a candle during a vigil Friday morning at the St. Francis Pavillion for his missing Lina. The family came to the United States from Afghanistan in 2019.



**Guardians of the Children pray with Riaz Sardar Khil during Friday's vigil. About 20 members of the nonprofit made up of motorcycle enthusiasts attended.**



**Robin Jerstad / Staff photographer**

**Ghafar Tanai Khan speaks during Friday's vigil. The Islamic Center of San Antonio is offering a \$100,000 reward for information.**

Hundreds of San Antonians started off their Friday outside in the chilly, foggy morning air praying for the safe return of 3-year-old Lina Sardar Khil.

The interfaith prayer vigil — organized by Pamela Allen, CEO of Eagle’s Flight Advocacy and Outreach — drew about 200 people to the St. Francis Episcopal Church pavilion on Bluemel Road.

Lina’s father, Riaz Sardar Khil, thanked everyone for coming out to pray for his daughter. During the ceremony he lit a candle in Lina’s name that was meant to symbolize hope, faith, prayer and unity.

“I’m hopeful that my daughter will be back,” her father said through Basir Qasmi, who translated most of the vigil to Pashto for the Afghan community members present. “I know there is a good person among us” whose prayer will be heard by God, “and that will be the cause for the safe return of my daughter.”

Qasmi works for Catholic Charities and is a board member in the local Afghan community. Qasmi prayed at the event, reciting verses from the Quran.

Lina has been missing since Monday evening. She last was seen on the playground inside of the gated Villas Del Cabo apartments, at 9400 Fredricksburg Road.

The San Antonio Police Department and the FBI’s San Antonio Field Office have been searching for her.

Thursday, the Islamic Center of San Antonio, a nonprofit that aims to support the Muslim community, announced on Facebook that a reward for information that helps find Lina has grown to \$100,000. Additionally, Crime Stoppers of San Antonio is offering a \$50,000 reward.

Lina’s family came to the United States from Afghanistan in 2019. Margaret Constantino, executive director of the Center for Refugee Services, said earlier this week that Lina’s family is among thousands of Afghan refugees in San Antonio, and they have been clients of the center since they arrived in the U.S.

San Antonio Police Chief William McManus attended the ceremony. Though he did not have any update, he recapped the efforts that have been made so far,

noting that officials are working especially hard on this case. He said that about 300 units at the Villas Del Cabo apartments have been searched, some more than once.

“We’re not giving up hope,” he said.

The FBI has brought in its Child Abduction Response team, behavioral analysis unit and data exploitation units, said Justin Garris, acting special agent in charge of the FBI San Antonio Field Office.

The Rev. Carrie Guerra, rector of St. Francis Episcopal Church, said the final prayer at the event.

“I think it’s lovely,” Guerra said of the ceremony when it concluded. “I think it’s lovely that so many people from different walks of life, different communities, multiple different languages, multiple faith practices all came together united for the sake of the safety of a precious baby.”

Attending the Friday ceremony was important to Bexar County Clerk Lucy Adame-Clark who said that she felt like she couldn’t celebrate Christmas Eve with her loved ones without first standing alongside those praying for Lina.

“This child belongs to the community,” she said. “And I don’t care what country they come from, we’re here to stand beside them.”

About 20 people with Guardians of the Children of San Antonio were at the event. The nonprofit made up of motorcycle enthusiasts aims to help children who have overcome abuse, according to its website.

Allen, the event organizer, said the prayer vigil came together quickly and that Lina’s family was quick to agree to the gathering. Allen said that Lina’s father and two of her uncles attended the event.

In his prayer at the ceremony, Kenny Vallespin, pastor of Summit Christian Center, said it is a time to rise as a community on behalf of Lina.

“Father God, we stand and we have faith that you are just and that you will let justice prevail,” he prayed. “We ask Lord that even though many people may not



know Lina out there, that her story is getting out there and that you will make a way where there seems to be no way.” *megan.rodriquez*

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