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A mother's tears cease, for now

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Marshalltown, Ia. - Celsa Escalante cried for three days straight.

Those tears ended - at least for the time being - when she was reunited with her 4-month-old daughter Ariana, who sank into her arms.

Escalante, 22, was arrested Tuesday at the Swift & Co. meatpacking plant in Marshalltown after working in the cafeteria as a cook for two weeks. She left behind her baby daughter but had no way of knowing who was taking care of her or how the nursing baby was being fed.

Escalante was released in a small group of single mothers Thursday night. She's still thinking about the others she met, including one who agreed to be deported and has left four children behind.

Escalante's ride from Camp Dodge in Johnston to Marshalltown on Thursday was the last leg in being reunited with Ariana Michelle Morales Escalante, who will be 5 months old on Dec. 26.

Xochitl Villeneuve, an immigration legal advocate, and Jessica Armstrong, a staff attorney with the MUNA Legal Clinic in Des Moines, agreed to drive her back to her child on Thursday night. The two had spent the day at Camp Dodge lobbying Immigrations and Customs Enforcement officials to release single mothers.

"We just bothered them so much," Villeneuve said.

The road ahead for Escalante, who is from El Salvador, remains uncertain. She must appear before a judge to respond to charges that she is in the country illegally.

But her mind was focused on her baby during the ride back to Marshalltown.

"I was worried that the people were taking care of her," she said in Spanish. Villeneuve was her interpreter. "If she was sick, who would take her to the doctor?"

Escalante learned Friday that community activists stepped in to help take care of the baby. On Wednesday, the child's diapers were changed and she was fed and admired by staff at the Hispanic ministry with St. Mary's Catholic Church in Marshalltown, where Escalante is a member. A priest and nun from the church drove to Camp Dodge on Wednesday in hopes of getting her released at least temporarily.

Escalante lives with her uncle and his wife in Marshalltown. Like many immigrants in Marshalltown, she sends money to family members back home.

"People come here to work so they can build a life," she said. When she arrived at the family's home after the trip from Camp Dodge, a young man answered the door. Escalante said nothing to him. Instead, she walked into the bedroom, where Ariana was sleeping.

She picked up her baby, pressed her check against her forehead and breathed in. Her face crumpled a bit, but she did not cry.

"She's very happy to be with her daughter," Villeneuve said.