

Missing children found unharmed

By: Shawn Charniga , The Record

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PETERSBURGH - A massive search in eastern Rensselaer County Saturday for two children from Cohoes who disappeared during a family camping trip Friday evening came to a happy ending Saturday night when the siblings were found unharmed.

Terry "T.J." Serson Jr., 8, and his sister Sara Petersen, 5, were found by a forest ranger around 8 p.m. in a grassy area some three miles from the campground. The children appeared to have followed a string that had been earlier anchored to the ground by rangers for the children to follow if they came across it.

According to broadcast reports, the two were resting in the grass when discovered by the ranger.

The news that the children were found was met with whoops of joy by the family and the some 300 volunteers and public safety professionals who had been combing the area for the children since Friday night.

The children appeared to be unharmed but were taken to Samaritan Hospital as a precaution. They had spent the night outside in temperatures that dropped into the 40s. Sara was wearing only shorts and a tank top and T.J. had on a T-shirt and cut-off shorts.

Kathy Thornton, a sister-in-law, answered the phone at the family's Cohoes home after the children were found Saturday night.

"We are very lucky people," she said. "Thank God they're OK. So many times these stories have an awful ending." She said the family had not yet returned home after their more than 24-hour ordeal.

During the search for the siblings, searchers were aided by a range of technology ranging from tracking dogs and to infrared imaging and satellite communication.

The Town Hall, taken over by State Police, sheriff's deputies and state forest rangers as their command post, and the volunteer Fire Department's District 1 headquarters, which was used as the staging area, were the search's primary hubs.

During Saturday afternoon, about 150 rescuers walked the area's heavily forested hills and along highways in search of the missing children. Those not actively searching, which Saturday afternoon included two aunts and an uncle, stood in the firehouse parking lot awaiting assignments. Cars lined both shoulders of Route 22.

According to Sgt. Mark St. Germain of the Sheriff's Department, this was the children's first trip to the Broken Wheel campground. The family typically visited the Aqua Vista campground, a short distance away, St. Germain said.

Only a few hours after the children arrived, accompanied by mother Nicole Petersen and aunt Nancy Marriner, they disappeared, having last

been seen leaving a playground in the campground.

Family members made a plea over local television stations Friday night, pleading for anyone with information to call them at home or on their cell phone.

Clothes worn by the children were provided to authorities, but a scent trail followed by tracking dogs ended a short distance into the woods, St. Germain said.

The search covered an 8-square-mile area, extending up to a ridge line overlooking the campground. St. Germain described the territory as "very rugged." Law enforcement agencies nationwide had been provided the children's names, and local authorities were keenly aware of their disappearance, according to St. Germain.

The county Bureau of Public Safety and Search and Rescue teams, Tri-State Search and Rescue teams, state Emergency Management Agency and the police, fire departments and rescue squads of neighboring communities all actively participated in the search.

County Executive Kathleen M. Jimino said she was "happy with the outcome of the search for the missing children."

"I am extremely impressed with the organization of the search effort," she said Saturday night.

"My thoughts and prayers continue to be with the family for the children's continued health and recovery following the very methodical and professional job by all involved. All the residents who volunteered, the Petersburg and neighboring fire companies, the state Department of Environmental Conservation park rangers, the county Sheriff's Department and the county's Bureau of Public Safety worked well together and were equally responsible for finding the children. I thank everyone involved for their efforts."