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Searchers find Garza's body in creek Wallet of Middlebury College student found in pants pocket

By [Gordon Dritschilo](#) Herald Staff

MIDDLEBURY — The search for Nicholas Garza ended in a logjam below the falls.

Rescue workers pulled a body tentatively identified as that of the 19-year-old Middlebury College freshman from Otter Creek in downtown Middlebury shortly before 9 p.m. Tuesday.

Middlebury Police Department spokesman Thomas Scanlon said they found a wallet with Garza's identification in it in a pants pocket on the body. The body was loaded into a van, to be taken to the Office of the Medical Examiner in Burlington. Scanlon said the medical examiner would confirm the identification in conjunction with the family.

Scanlon said Middlebury Police Chief Thomas Hanley and Lt. Jocelyn Stohl of the Vermont State Police Search and Rescue Team spotted the body wedged in between logs.

"Very little was visible," Scanlon said. "It was by chance Chief Hanley was there, just before 4 in the afternoon, with Lt. Stohl."

Hanley and Stohl were doing preliminary work for a search scheduled for the weekend. Seventy-five to 80 divers were expected to come in for a concerted, large-scale effort and the two were taking temperature readings and depth soundings.

"Chief Hanley spotted something in the debris pile which piqued his curiosity," Scanlon said. "He couldn't see any more than a little bit."

Rescue workers were brought in from the Vermont State Police Dive Team, the Vermont State Police Search and Rescue Team and Colchester Technical Rescue, and some of the debris was cut away with chainsaws before they could recover the body.

Scanlon said Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Steven Shapiro will perform an autopsy today in Burlington.

Garza, who came to Middlebury from Albuquerque, N.M., disappeared Feb. 5.

He was last seen at a dormitory, hanging out with a few friends. His mother reported him missing to the college the next day, but after making some inquiries, a school official decided he had probably left campus with some friends as it was winter break.

Garza was reported missing to the police Feb. 10, and since then, Chief Hanley has said, no investigation has ever commanded so much of his department's time and attention, with three officers assigned full-time and auxiliary officers brought in as needed.

Attempts to electronically locate Garza's cell phone failed, meaning it was either broken or the battery was dead. Police checked his bank account for activity, interviewed his friends and searched area surveillance cameras for any trace of him.

Searches conducted large-scale sweeps of campus and nearby areas and police chased down a large number of leads. At various points, searches involved at least eight major organizations from multiple states, helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, more than a dozen dogs, digital imaging and analysis, thermal imaging and ground-penetrating radar.

During the work on Wednesday, police established a perimeter that kept onlookers well back from the search area. Numerous knots of people stood at various spots along the yellow police tape. Floodlights lit a staging area and press photographers jostled for position nearby.

A team from New York using underwater cameras had previously searched area beneath the falls, but Scanlon pointed out that the water had been much deeper and moving more quickly then.

An aerial surveillance photo taken last month showed what investigators called an "object of interest" in the creek behind Middlebury High School. The photographer said the image was consistent with Garza's blue jeans and white sneakers and police searched the area without success.

Scanlon said Wednesday night the object had been moving and was seen upriver from where the body was found.

Garza was described by family and friends as a Renaissance man, at home both on a hockey rink and at a debate tournament, who read

voraciously and worked hard in school. People noted his intelligence, refinement and charm, with several calling him wise beyond his years.

His mother, Natalie Garza, has been staying in Middlebury since shortly after Nicholas Garza disappeared, and had since been joined by Nicholas's father and had brought her younger son up and enrolled him in school locally. She could not be reached Wednesday evening.

Natalie Garza was active in the search, working with various foundations to bring in out-of-state experts and to offer a reward for information on her son's whereabouts.

Middlebury College President Ronald Liebowitz issued a statement expressing condolences for the Garza family and saying that details on a gathering in remembrance of the student would soon follow.

Scanlon said he hoped the discovery would provide closure to the family.

"It's not a sense of joy in any sense," he said. "A young man's life was lost. ... It's a tragic event, but it's drawn to a close."

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