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Rutland County

Garza search unveils no clues

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By *Gordon Dritschilo Herald Staff*

After a daylong search Thursday, Nicholas Garza was still missing.

More than 30 people, along with canine teams, participated in the search, according to Middlebury Police Chief Thomas Hanley. The public and the media were asked to keep back from the search area, a wooded ridgeline at the edge of campus, to avoid disrupting it.

In a written statement issued shortly after 7 p.m., Hanley said plans were under way to resume the search "as soon as conditions warrant" and that smaller-scale searches would continue. The search turned up "nothing relevant" to the investigation, according to the statement.

Earlier in the day, Hanley said the search had three objectives — to find Garza, to find evidence pointing to the manner or cause of his disappearance, and to try to rule out areas, eliminating them from further searching.

The last large-scale search was Feb. 23, though Hanley said there had been small spot searches several times a week. He also said police had learned details of Garza's on-campus habits, helping narrow the search area.

"It's a very focused search today," he said. "It's not a broad search area like we were doing early on. ... The last time it was a blind search."

The search was focused in areas on the edge of campus, where Hanley said Garza had friends he might have been visiting.

While much of the snow was gone in open areas, Hanley said it was still deep in the wooded areas. It had also softened in the past few days.

"We had a lot of snow melt yesterday," he said. "We've been doing a daily assessment of the snow cover."

Hanley said police took core samples, drilling down to the ground. While the snow and ice had been like concrete a few days ago, Hanley said it had softened in many places. However, he said there were still areas where accumulation of snow and ice prevented a thorough search.

Hanley said police are also keeping a search of Otter Creek in mind, but that conditions are not expected to be favorable for six to eight weeks.

"That river is deep and dangerous and has a heavy current," he said.

Meanwhile, Hanley said Central Vermont Public Service Corp. has been dredging its canals.

The Vermont State Police Search and Rescue Team directed the search, and participating agencies included the New Hampshire-based Upper Valley Wilderness Response, Colchester Technical Rescue, New England Canine Search and Rescue, the Middlebury Police and Middlebury College Public Safety.

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Previous efforts have made use of ground-penetrating radar, a helicopter and thermal imaging equipment. Thursday's search, Hanley said, relied primarily on dogs and probing equipment.

"We're going to try to open up a lot of areas of snow as much as we can to try to stimulate a scent," he said.

Garza was last seen at 11:06 p.m. Feb. 5 at a dormitory where he was visiting with friends. A freshman from Albuquerque, N.M., he had been staying on campus during winter break.

Hanley said police have found no solid information on his whereabouts and that, given the publicity the case has received, it is odd his department has not gotten more leads.

"No credible information has been received to indicate Nick has ever left the campus," he said. "We're still stopping at 11:06 p.m. that Tuesday night."

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