

Family, friends not giving up on missing Stevenson student

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BARABOO, Wis. -- The passionate army of family and friends who have come together to try to find missing Stevenson High School student Lee S. Cutler finished another exhausting and emotional day Wednesday with more questions than answers.

Today should begin the same way -- with a heat-sensing helicopter combing the colorful Wisconsin hills and farm fields for the 18-year-old Buffalo Grove man, while divers with sonar perform a grim search in the murky currents of the Baraboo River.

Until Cutler is found, the story remains a mystery that unites not only searchers in Wisconsin, but also friends and loved ones in the Chicago suburbs and in the online world of facebook.com.



A police helicopter scans a bluff along the Baraboo River while searching for Buffalo Grove teen Lee Cutler.

-Bill Zars | Staff Photographer

"They just wrapped around this thing ever since (authorities in Wisconsin) found the car," says a grateful Barry Frazin, Cutler's stepfather, who offers thanks to everyone involved as he talks with Winthrop Harbor Police Cmdr. Dan Bitton.

Bitton volunteered his time to pilot the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition's Air-One helicopter donated to the search.

The affable young Cutler with eclectic interests and a wide circle of friends was reported missing Saturday. He had attended a birthday dinner for a friend Friday evening, then gathered with a small group of teens at another friend's house, where they watched videos before he and some others in the group spent the night.

"It's all so ordinary," says Dan de Grazia, a family friend and father who is handling media requests for weary family members, including Cutler's stepdad, his mother, Beth Frazin, and his father, Danny Cutler.

The teens got a full night's sleep, they said, and Cutler dropped a friend at home at 9:50 a.m. Saturday. Cutler never showed up for his part-time job at Westfield Hawthorn shopping center in Vernon Hills, and didn't come home.

His mother posted a plea for help at facebook.com on a group site called "lets find lee!!" that has drawn more than 1,400 hits from friends offering tips and asking how they can help.

"If you are having a hard time with this, please please do not go through this alone, there are people out there who are willing to listen and willing to help," reads one Facebook entry posted Wednesday night after students heard disheartening news that dimmed hopes.

Cutler apparently drove to Wisconsin Saturday morning and visited a park. A Sauk County sheriff's deputy discovered Cutler's locked 2007 Toyota Corolla at 3:30 a.m. Monday, parked in a paved pull-off near a historical marker along Highway 33, east of Baraboo and a few hundred yards from the Baraboo River. Searchers found Cutler's favorite yarmulke on the muddy bank, and his backpack and a blanket along the river a couple hundred yards farther from the road.

A computer technician from Long Grove, de Grazia utilized "the Facebook team" to sound the alarm and gather information. The group meets in person or online every night. Many parents came to Wednesday night's gathering.

"It's an extraordinary group," de Grazia marvels, noting Cutler is an extraordinary kid.

"If you were a Cubs fan, he'd root for whoever was playing the Cubs. He was a Packers fan," de Grazia notes. "He's going to be for the other side just to make it interesting."

While de Grazia has harvested countless stories about how "Lee was always somebody who wanted to make you laugh," he hasn't found the "Aha" moment that gives insight as to Cutler's plans or why he left without telling anyone. He had plans to attend a concert tonight, and talked of maybe going to Israel after graduation from high school.

"Nobody is saying he gave away his favorite stuff or he said goodbye in a different way," de Grazia says. "Boy, if we had the formula, it wouldn't happen to Lee and it wouldn't happen to anyone."

Searchers still hoped to rescue the teen, who liked the outdoors and had visited the area before, said Capt. Kevin Fults of the Sauk County sheriff's department.

But police had no reason to believe Cutler was prepared to survive cold nights. The area where his items were found is tucked behind a cornfield, has no pathways and isn't scenic. Recent rains made the river muddy, high and fast-moving.

"A search of the river is continuing in the event that Mr. Cutler jumped or fell into the river," said a news release delivered after Wednesday's fruitless search.

Police said they found clothing, an empty Advil PM bottle and letters to and from loved ones that were found in his backpack. One recent note to his mother talked about how much he loved her. But officials at the scene refused to speculate about Cutler's fate.

"It seems to be totally out of character," Danny Cutler said of his son's behavior, as he struggled to keep his composure. "I hope they find him."

At a news conference earlier this week, a sobbing Beth Frazin told the Baraboo News Republic, "I love you, Lee, and I want you to be home. I have a void in my heart. This is just killing me."