

Teen versus Wild

By Liz Wood

Nic Merfeld learned a lesson that could have ended in tragedy last week after spending 25 hours stranded in the Snowy Range. Safety comes first.

"I was cocky", Merfeld said in an interview Wednesday afternoon.

"We got here Sunday and I wanted to get out there and wasn't as prepared as I should have been," Merfeld said.

Merfeld did not have all the survival gear he wanted, but he had enough to keep him alive while he was missing.

The high school senior, from Independence, Iowa, was on his second Wyoming snowmobile trip.

Merfeld, his dad, brother and four others arrived at Ten Mile Inn Sunday ready for some quality time.

In the 80s and 90s, Nic's dad, Mark, and Tracy Knake used to come to the Snowy Range. Last year was the first trip with their boys.

The group rented the snow machines from Saratoga Resort and Spa (SRS), but decided against a guide as Mark and Tracy were familiar with the area.

After going off and doing his "own thing" Monday, Nic returned to the trail and tried to find his group.

"My gas was low, and I panicked," Nic said. "I knew better than to panic, but I did it anyway."

Nic tried to find his way to the Quealy warming hut, but the wind had picked up and visibility was low.

Then, he got stuck.

"I ran out of gas trying to get out," Nic said.

"Then I had a temper tantrum."

"After I calmed down, I knew I was probably going to end up spending the night."

"What do I need to do?" he asked himself. "I need to build a shelter."

Nic had matches, a pocket knife, a lighter, toilet paper, a bottle of Lipton Iced Tea, canteen, hand and foot warmers, three hats and three pairs of gloves.

Nic relied on what he had learned from his favorite television show, "Man vs. Wild".

"It was a huge factor in my survival," Nic said.

Nic used the rut made by the snowmobile, broke twigs and made a bed, then cut pine tree branches for a lean-to.

He built a fire using the toilet paper and matches and kept feeding it with dead branches. Eventually, the fire was hot enough it was sinking into the

melting snow and suffocating itself.

Trying to save the fire, Nic threw his American Eagle ball-cap in, but it didn't help.

Nic lost his knife carrying loads of wood.

As the sun set, Nic saw snowmobilers and tried flagging them down with his flashlight, but they didn't see him.

Hand and foot warmers and water kept Nic going through the night. The bed of twigs protected his snowmobile pants from getting wet, so he stayed warm. Fortunately, the weather was 20 to 30 degrees Fahrenheit rather than the below zero temperatures the week before.

When Nic ran out of water, he put snow into his canteen and put it against his body to melt the snow.

"I was saving the tea for energy," Nic said.

Nic spent an anxious night listening to coyotes howling, wondering whether they were wolves. "I only slept about two hours."

Nic said he had shiver attacks and went into shock, at one point thinking "this could be it."

He thought about people who had become lost and were never found.

Then Nic reminded himself the rescue team and his family were looking for him and he started to push out the negative thoughts and stay positive.

He got up at 4 a.m. and began to plan his day.

Nic realized he did not have a GPS tracker on his machine, so he took steps so he could be found.

He created five or six "HELP" signs, with arrows pointing to his shelter, out of tree branches. Some could be seen from the air, others he put on hills for snowmobilers to see.

By 3 p.m. Tuesday, Nic realized he may have to spend another night in the snow and started to make his shelter bigger and better. When he stopped digging, he realized it looked like a grave.

By this time, Nic's snow pants were starting to get wet, and he was worrying about getting through the night. He was losing hope.

Then, he heard snowmobiles outside. He got out of the shelter and saw the sleds. He was

found! He was so excited he gave the first guy a hug.

The people who found him were not part of the rescue team and did not identify themselves.

The snowmobilers offered Nic Gatorade and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "I really didn't have an appetite," Nic said, "but I chugged the Gatorade."

The men got the sled out of the hole and refueled it for Nic.

Nic rode his sled back to the warming hut and sat next to the fire. "That was real helpful," Nic said.

The search and rescue team headquartered at the Quealy warming hut gave Nic "all kinds of stuff", a dry coat, head sleeves and gloves. "They (rescue team) were really prepared," Nic said.

Marty Huntley, an EMT on the rescue team, did a quick inspection to make sure Nic did not have hypothermia.

The group gave Nic the option to ride double or ride his snowmobile back to Ten Mile Inn.

Nic opted to ride his snowmobile.

When he reached Chain's End, Marty loaded Nic's snowmobile and Nic rode in Deputy Sheriff Louis Braun's truck back to the Inn.

There, Marty did a full inspection and checked for frostbite. Nic's only complaint was his chest and throat hurt, Marty told him it was probably from the light air and cold conditions.

Nic, who snowmobiles in Iowa on a regular basis, said he is usually more prepared when he snowmobiles. His backpack usually has a sweatshirt and food in it.

"I was wearing my lucky Fighting Irish t-shirt," Nic smiled.

Nic's message to snowmobilers - "always be prepared and, if something does happen, never lose hope."

Waiting for word

Nic's brother, Ryan, posted on his Facebook status, "my



Photo by Liz Wood

Happy to be dry and safe, Nic Merfeld poses for a photo.

parents are going through hell for the second time in six months."

Ryan was run over by a pickup truck six months earlier. "That kid shouldn't be alive," Mark said.

"This (Nic missing) was a parent's nightmare," Mark said.

Mark helped search for Nic the first day, but was told to stay put on Tuesday, in case they found Nic's body.

Kimberly Thyne owns Ten Mile Inn with her husband, Ken, and Susan Wallace is the general manager at the SRS.

Kimberly and Susan stayed with Mark as he waited for word on his son.

"Kimberly was fantastic," Mark said, "and Susan was so supportive."

Mark also depended on prayer groups all over the country.

Mark's wife stayed home in Independence. When he called her Tuesday morning, friends were sitting with her waiting for word.

"One of my friends had 175 calls on his phone Tuesday," Mark said.

In the Platte Valley, he saw what locals do when someone is in need.

"The support here was very overwhelming," Mark said.

Mike Janssen, owner of the SRS, along with two of his employees, Mike Powell and Jeff Pope joined the search. Mike led the way and ended up going over a 20-foot cliff because the conditions were so bad he didn't see it. He ended up with a twisted wrist.

Nineteen guests from Car-

roll, Iowa, stopped their vacation and helped with the search, Kimberly said.

"When Mark received word that Nic was found, he picked me up and gave me a hug. We were both so happy and crying," said Susan.

"SRS couldn't be happier for Nic and his family that his survival instincts kicked in and he made it back safely," said Susan. "It causes us to really take a hard look at all our preparation for snowmobilers. We now realize a good question to ask is, 'are you prepared to spend the night in the wilderness?'"

Meaning anything can happen, weather conditions can change in a moments notice, so do you have what it takes - equipment and knowledge - to spend the night in the snow?"

The Merfelds and SRS said they are very grateful for the men and women who helped in Nic's rescue.

Search and Rescue members involved in this search were Marty Huntley, Gary Steele, Bo Alameda, Matt Roberts, Mack Miller, Jason Theesfeld, Homer Beach, James Willis, Scott Warren, Ron Brown, Elizabeth Brown, Cory Nuhn, Bruce Romios, Lester Thompson, Jerry Fluty, Cody Butterfield and Brandon Gray.

Forest Service employees Cindy Gradin, Landon McGuire, Tyler Christen and Mike Sewall also assisted.

Editor's note: The family would like to hear from the people who did not identify themselves so they can thank them, and asked them to call the Saratoga Sun for Mark's phone number.

Correction

In the Jan. 5, 2011 edition of the *Saratoga Sun*, honor roll student Kaitlynn Snell was misidentified. Dylan Snodgrass was also left off the honor roll. Both students earned a grade point average between 3.0 and 3.49. The *Sun* regrets the error.