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Missing Riverside High School teacher's death is confirmed

By Zahira Torres and Michael D. Hernandez / El Paso Times
Posted: 12/19/2009 12:00:00 AM MST

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EL PASO -- Months of scouring the desert and seeking tips that could help find a popular Riverside High School art teacher came to an end Friday.

Authorities confirmed that a skull found in the desert between Fort Hancock and Sierra Blanca belonged to Gustav Erick Djerf, a longtime educator who disappeared from the area Aug. 10.

The news came as a painful blow to relatives, who had been holding out hope that he would return unharmed.

It meant his co-workers at Riverside High School would have to cope with their own heartbreak and comfort students on the day before the start of the Christmas break.

But it also brought closure for a family who spent four grueling months wondering what had happened to a loving brother and a caring son who vanished from a campsite near the Rio Grande.

"You are always looking for him in different people," Kristin Sanchez said about agonizing over her brother's whereabouts. "Now we know that he did pass away, so that will help us to close that aspect of our grieving process and allow us to fully grieve because the uncertainty is gone."

Djerf, 47, was supposed to take his mother to a doctor appointment the morning he disappeared.

Sanchez said it was then that the family began to worry that Djerf, who was bipolar, might be in danger.

He left behind the keys to his apartment,

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a note telling his mom he loved her and his cell phone.

He also left little notes asking that certain items be given to specific people.

Sanchez said her brother was a happy person who would not have done anything to hurt himself.

Djerf's family posted missing-person fliers on both sides of the border and sought help from his friends, co-workers and law enforcement officials.

His mother, Peggy, visited Riverside High on the first day of school in August, hoping to find her son back in his busy classroom.

Authorities searched the desert for months with helicopters, dogs and on horseback but found nothing more than his camping gear, food and car.



Gustav Erick Djerf, 47, in this photo dated 2007 was an art teacher from Riverside High School. He disappeared in August from a campsite in Hudspeth County near the Rio Grande. Human remains found in the area were found to be Djerf's. Photo Courtesy of Djerf family. (Djerf family)

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Still, they said they would keep looking.

Last month, authorities got a clue.

Hudspeth County Sheriff Arvin West said a rancher from the area was checking on his cows after they had walked off toward the Rio Grande when his dogs spotted a skull.

The skull was tested, and results on Thursday identified it as Djerf.

News quickly spread to his friends and family after Peggy Djerf sent an e-mail explaining what had happened and thanking people for their support.

"He was a wonderful man," Peggy Djerf told the El Paso Times.

Her sentiments were echoed Friday by dozens of artists, musicians, students and educators.

At Riverside High, the last day of school before the winter break was gloomy as students grieved the loss of a dedicated teacher who pushed them to apply for scholarships, sponsored a Youth for Christ group during his lunch period and frequently stayed after school to help them finish artwork before competitions.

Michael Martinez, the principal of the school, said he intended to tape a cheerful morning announcement on Friday wishing students and teachers well during their holidays.

Instead, he stared into the camera and shared the news he had learned about Gustav Djerf.

The announcement stunned Riverside High senior Eli Watson, who said Djerf left behind many lessons that still resonate with his many former students.

A trombone player, Watson approached Djerf last year when he learned the teacher was also an accomplished jazz musician of the same instrument.

A close bond formed between the two, and Djerf turned Watson on to the music of legendary jazz trombonists.

They often played early-morning jam sessions in Djerf's classroom before school began and the teacher was in just about every audience whenever Watson had a gig.

"He saw something in me and I'm grateful for that because I don't think I would be as dedicated," Watson said, and added that he wanted to pursue his study of music in college. "He helped me and I want to be like that to another person. I want to go up to a student and just offer my help as a musician."

Rick Boisselier, an art teacher at Riverside High, said he was having a hard time coping with losing a good friend.

"I am not sure what happened, but he had a lot going for him," he said, and added that Djerf's artwork was gaining in popularity. "And we had a lot of plans for the (students) this year."

Boisselier said he planned to propose to school administrators that art students paint a mural at the campus in honor of Djerf.

He said having students share their artistic talent would be a fitting tribute for a generous teacher.

"Whatever you would ask of him, he would do," he said.

Djerf's family said that during the past few months they have learned of the impact he had on those around him.

They said they were planning a memorial service in January so that everyone who cared for him would have an opportunity to say goodbye.

But they are waiting while authorities continue their investigation.

Police spokesman Javier Sambrano said the medical examiner's office has not been able to determine a cause of death because not all of Djerf's remains have been found.

The Hudspeth County Sheriff's Office and the Texas Rangers are now investigating the case.

Authorities said they did not suspect foul play.

Sanchez said her family was simply thankful that they can have some closure, something she said many other families don't get.

"We may never know what happened to him," she said, "but we do know as Christians that he is OK and he is at peace because he has gone on to heaven."

Zahira Torres may be reached at ztorres@elpasotimes.com; 512-479-6606.

Michael D. Hernandez may be reached at mhernandez@elpasotimes.com; 546-6151.

Times reporter Stephanie Sanchez contributed to this story.

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