



NOAH K. MURRAY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Louis and Michelle Caridad, Gerry's parents, wait for word about their missing son in their home in the Port Monmouth section of Middletown.

Search intensifies for missing boy

Hundreds seek the streetwise 10-year-old who ran from mom at a store in Holmdel

BY MARYANN SPOTO
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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

As a snowstorm blasted the area yesterday, police continued searching for a 10-year-old Middletown boy who disappeared from a Holmdel department store Wednesday afternoon.

More than 250 searchers braved frigid temperatures and driving snow hoping to find Gerry Caridad, who wandered away from his mother at a Kohl's department store.

The Port Monmouth Elementary School fourth-grader has a history of running away, but never longer than a few hours, police said.

"We're still hoping for the best. It's mind-boggling that we haven't been able to come up with anything at this point," Holmdel Police Lt. Thomas Vetterl said as the investigation stretched into its second night.

Yesterday, neighborhood residents joined police to search for the missing boy and distributed fliers alerting the public to Gerry's disappearance. The search area extended from the department store to a 1-mile grid that included Veterans Park, a wooded section that runs from behind the shopping center to Middle Road in neighboring Hazlet. Police also searched a creek, which can be waist high in places, along the back end of the park, Vetterl said.



GERRY

On Wednesday night, police dogs picked up the boy's scent in the department store parking lot, but lost it at the ATM across the lot, police said. That was the last link to Gerry's whereabouts.

Michelle Caridad, the boy's mother, said she last saw him shortly after they walked into the Kohl's on Route 35 in Holmdel around 3:45 p.m. Wednesday. They had circled the crowded parking lot several times looking for a space, so she warned Gerry and his sister to stay by her side after they parked. When she went to grab his hand almost as soon as they walked through the doors, he was gone, she said.

Initially, his sister and mother thought he pulled one of his usual disappearing acts, so they casually browsed through the clothes racks, pretending they were more interested in the garments than in finding him. When several minutes passed and he did not surface, they rushed to store personnel, who announced over the loudspeaker that customers should be on the lookout for the child.

When the boy not located, Michelle Caridad called her husband who in turn alerted police.

Police and Gerry's father scoured the Kohl's store and the surrounding area.

At about 8:30 p.m., 10 minutes after police alerted nearby shopkeepers of the boy's disappearance, he showed up at EB Games, a video game store in the Kohl's Shopping Center.

"He came in looking both ways,

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MISSING

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like he knew he was being followed," said Pete Cusumano Jr., an assistant manager. "Eddie (another employee) points and says, 'Hey. Aren't you looking for your mom?'" The boy kept screaming "no," he said.

"I say, 'Hey kid. Wait a minute ... that's him.' He knew we knew him and he just bolted."

Gerry ran to the left and a man outside the 7-Eleven convenience store two doors down grabbed him but the boy wriggled from his grasp, said Cusumano, 23, of Aberdeen.

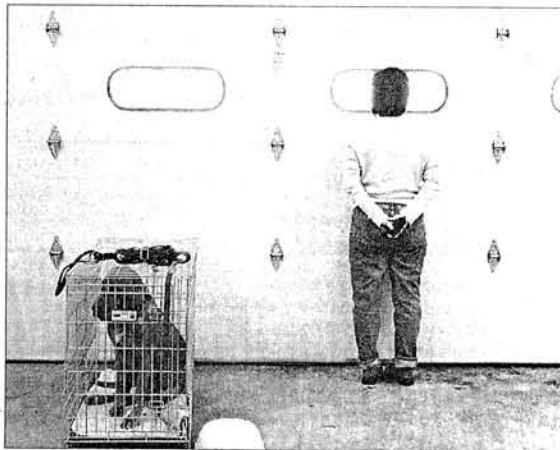
"I was embarrassed I couldn't catch him. He was fast," he added. "He just vanished."

Police describe Gerry as 4-foot-3, 65 pounds, with a thin build. The brown-haired, brown-eyed Hispanic boy was wearing a red sweatshirt and black windbreaker-type pants with a red stripe down the side. His parents worry that his blue-and-green hooded jacket, black knit hat, navy blue gloves and gray scarf will no longer protect him from the frigid temperatures and snow. He doesn't have any money, they said. He also takes medication for attention deficit disorder.

Holmdel police ask anyone with information about Gerry to call (732) 946-4400.

Gerry's parents, Louis and Michelle Caridad, said yesterday they fear for their son's safety. Although he's streetwise, they said they're afraid he could be hurt.

While keeping vigil at home yesterday afternoon, Louis Caridad



Liberty, a bloodhound with Central Jersey Technical Rescue used to search for the missing boy, takes a break at the Holmdel First Aid Squad building, which is the command center in the search.

stoked the fire in the wood-burning stove in the living room of their Port Monmouth house as the snow piled up outside.

"Gotta keep it toasty," he said. "I'm figuring he comes home, he's gonna be freezing."

Running her hand through her shiny dark brown hair for the umpteenth time, his mother said, "I'm afraid they won't find him. I'm afraid they'll find him hurt."

The last time Gerry ran away was the day after Thanksgiving, when he left the house and hid in a neighbor's back yard until nightfall, his parents said. By then, because of his fear of the dark, his mother said, he was ready to come home. But he deliberately left his coat in one yard and stretched the collar of his shirt to make him appear disheveled and showed up at another

neighbor's house claiming he was attacked, his mother said.

Another time, he didn't come home from school for hours. He spent that time wandering around and was found near a local school. His parents believe he planned that disappearance because he saved his snack for later that day.

They're also worried because he hasn't taken his medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder since Wednesday morning.

The couple, married 10 years, adopted Gerry's 11-year-old sister, Jenesi, in November 2000 after the state Division of Youth and Family Services placed her with them nine months earlier. Wanting to keep the siblings together, they adopted Gerry as well, they said. He lived with them for a year before his adoption was finalized in November 2001.



Mike Sternick of Clifton, a volunteer with New Jersey Search and Rescue, walks a field along Route 35 in Holmdel yesterday looking for missing 10-year-old Gerry Caridad. More than 250 searchers braved the storm to look for the fourth-grader.

PHOTOS BY NOAH ADDIS/THE STAR-LEDGER

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The Jersey Shore's News
Source

Missing boy found

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STAFF REPORT

HOLMDEL -- A 10-year-old Middletown boy for whom police had been searching for more than a day was found this morning when he walked out of the woods behind the shopping complex where he had disappeared, police said.

Complaining that he was hungry and his feet were cold, Gerry Caridad was taken to Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch for evaluation, Holmdel police Lt. Thomas Zetterl said this morning. His family also was notified.

Police, who searched for the boy through yesterday's snowstorm, don't know where the boy had been staying since he disappeared at about 4 p.m. Wednesday.

Hundreds of police officers and volunteers combed an area of about 4 square miles around the Kohl's shopping plaza on Route 35, looking for the boy. Police also distributed fliers with a picture and his description on it. His mother, who had been shopping at the plaza, reported that he disappeared from her side.

The boy's father said his son had psychological problems and had not taken needed medication since he had disappeared.

"Anyone, if you see my son, please, just grab him," Louis Caridad had said.

Gerry Caridad had been seen once since he disappeared on Wednesday. Someone who had heard the announcement about the missing boy saw him outside the 7-Eleven convenience store at the opposite end of the shopping plaza. When the person called out to the boy, he ran away.