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## NEWS

[ Wednesday, April 4, 2007 ]

## Local rescue team ready for action

By **Erin McCracken** [EMAIL](#)  
 Collegian Staff Writer

This past weekend, members of Centre County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue (CCSOSAR) gathered to prepare for the unexpected, armed with nothing but maps and compasses.

Through beginner training classes held once or twice a year, the squad strives to educate its team and the community in "outdoor knowledge for basic survival," CCSOSAR President Tony Ghaffari said.

Many team members have been in the military. Some are college students and others are older members of the community.

Ghaffari said three people turned in applications to join the team last weekend.

CCSOSAR is an all-volunteer organization and currently has 40 members, 24 of whom are active in the area.

"The rest of the folks are still affiliated with our team, but are all over the state," Ghaffari said. "Some are students that have graduated and moved out of Centre County."

CCSOSAR is involved in about a dozen search missions each year, Ghaffari said.

"We are the most busy in the winter and fall when hunters are outdoors," he said. "Most people can get disoriented in the winter when everything looks the same."

Most of these victims are eventually recovered, but not all the CCSOSAR searches result in a happy ending.

The team spent two weeks combing the area in early November 2001 after Penn State student Cindy Song disappeared. CCSOSAR was also the only search and rescue squad associated with the search for missing Centre County District Attorney Ray Gricar because it operates under the Centre County Sheriff, Denny Nau.

"We covered multiple areas of interest to the police during the search [for Gricar]," Ghaffari said.

He added that search and rescue classes are important because it is a way for CCSOSAR to reach out to the community.

"This is how we try to recruit members," he said. "We are looking for quality over quantity. The main goal has to be to help people."

When 52-year-old Brenda Pletcher went missing somewhere in Lamar Township on Feb. 2, CCSOSAR spent eight hours in the field looking for her despite cold conditions.

"A text message went out to our group as an alert," Ghaffari said. "We met at Nittany Mall to establish a command post and point of operations."

In the early morning hours two days later, a nearby residence called the state police to report that Pletcher was there and in good health, according to police reports.

While multiple search teams may be called to look for a missing person, Ghaffari said, CCSOSAR is also certified to search for evidence in an investigation.

Nau said CCSOSAR serves as an extension of the sheriff's office during a search.

"We coordinate our efforts," Nau said. "[CCSOSAR] does not collect evidence, but they can help identify

what is evidence and block off areas so it is not tampered with. They will call in a police [officer] or investigator when they come across something of interest."

Ghaffari said that each search mission depends on the circumstances.

"We can only look for so long," Ghaffari said. "A search can last from three days to several weeks. You never know what is going to happen."



PHOTO: Andrew Lala

Tony Ghaffari shows two different harnesses.

It uses training standards of the National Association for Search and Rescue (NASAR) and the Pennsylvania Search & Rescue Council (PSARC) and also meets federal requirements to become a part of the South Central Mountain Regional Counter-Terrorism Task Force (CTTF).

"This means we can be called to search at sites similar to the 9/11 plane crash in Shanksville for survivors or for evidence," Ghaffari said.

CCSOSAR has to be prepared for the unexpected. One way to educate the team and community members about search and rescue skills is through classes.

After last weekend's class, a short test was administered about the information covered. Ghaffari said this basic level is the only test that can be administered by CCSOSAR staff.

"Saturday's class is a required introductory course for team members," Ghaffari said.

During the training, Ghaffari led an information session and discussed topics such as search theory and victim handling.

The group then went outside under overcast skies to learn how to orient themselves as if they were lost.

Anya Ryba (junior-animal science), the vice president of CCSOSAR, said she has been with the group for two years.

"We teach people how to quickly get a bearing," she said. "It helps people determine where they are and what direction they are going."

Ryba and Ghaffari took a portion of the group and taught them how to count their steps in order to determine distance -- a process called pacing.

Daniel Barrett, another team member and instructor, took the other half of the group and showed them how to use a compass.

"I try to explain how the map, compass and earth line up so they are all speaking the same language," Barrett said. "There are basic elements that are important to know how to use when you are searching for a subject or if you are the one that becomes lost."

After passing the introductory course, a search team member has six months to complete 14 hours of classroom instruction and seven hours of outdoor practice to receive certification as a field team member from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

"A field team member completes navigation and survival training and are actually allowed to take part in searches," Ghaffari said.

All CCSOSAR team members must also be certified in CPR and First Aid.

After spending a brief period completing exercises outdoors last weekend, the class went back inside to discuss equipment and clothing necessary to have on search and rescue missions.

Besides proper clothing, boots, a pack and at least two liters of water, Ghaffari told the class that a "positive mental attitude" is the most important thing to carry with them.

"Most of what we teach is common sense," he said. "There are simple things people don't even think about that could end up saving lives."



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