

# Hiker found dead at Dripping Springs

By Christopher Schurtz

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A former New Mexico State University student with a love for photography, his church and the Organ Mountains was killed after a fall during an afternoon hike Tuesday near Dripping Springs, east of Las Cruces.

The body of Richard Odom, 21, of Las Cruces was found about 8 a.m. Wednesday by search-and-rescue teams that had spent the night looking for him.

New Mexico State Police Capt. Richard Williams said Odom and his friend, Jason Tenison, an NMSU student, were hiking on a trail in the Organ Mountains Recreation Area late Tuesday afternoon.

According to Tenison's account to police, the two were descending a steep slope when Odom, who family members say was a frequent hiker familiar with Dripping Springs and the Organs, lost his footing.

Williams said estimates of search-and-rescue volunteers indicated Odom fell or slid about 100 feet. At some point, Odom struck his head, which likely caused his death.

The two were off the trail in a fairly rugged area, about a mile east of the ranger station at the foot of the mountains when the fall occurred, Williams said.

Tenison, who also sustained minor injuries, called 911 on his cell phone, and by 7:30 p.m. county sheriff's deputies, state police and volunteer search teams were at Dripping Springs, assisted by helicopters with search lights until high winds made that too dangerous.

"They continued to do a ground search all night but didn't locate him," Williams said. "Around 8 a.m. they found him, and he had suffered fatal injuries."

With the shock of the day clear in her voice, Sharon Odom recalled her son, the youngest of four sons, as a young man with "a good sense of humor. Everybody loved him."

Though he was about to return to NMSU after a hiatus to pursue a degree in engineering, Odom said her son was also nurturing a love of photography, often shooting sunsets and his beloved Organ Mountains.

"He'd been up there a number of times. He loved photography. He was up there getting some shots," Odom said.

Odom was also "extremely involved in his church (University Church of Christ), the church group, the campus group. He had a very close relationship with God," she said.

"And he lived here all his life, so everybody knew him. Older people loved him, and all the little kids loved him."

Not long after her son, adopted as an infant, graduated from Mayfield High School and turned 18, Odom said he reunited with his birth family.

"He was a blessing to us. He was very proud of his family. He was also adopted into God's family, and he was very proud of that," Odom said.

University Church of Christ youth minister David Harrelson said he watched Odom grow from a small child to "a very outgoing young man. He had a really good sense of humor. Everything was funny to Richard. He was laughing all the time."

Three members of the church were part of the search-and-rescue effort, Harrelson said. He said once during a church camping trip to the Gila Mountains in 2001, Odom himself helped rescue a hiker who had fallen in a large hole.

"That's the kind of guy Richard was. There are a thousand stories I could tell about Richard," Harrelson said. "His life was tragically cut short."

Volunteers with search and rescue, and Bureau of Land Management staffers, said accidents like Odom's that lead to injury or death is what they try the most to avoid.

Ruben Gonzales, incident coordinator for the state police, said this was the fourth search-and-rescue mission so far this year in this district (roughly in the south-central area of the state), and most of those have been searches for lost hikers.

The search for Odom was "very difficult on the searchers," Gonzales said, especially since most rescues his teams conduct are relatively minor.

Manny Guerra, Dripping Springs facility manager since 1991, said Odom's was the first death of a hiker in the recreation area, at least since he's been there.

"When people get stranded or injured, that's one thing. But when people die, it's a tragedy for the family, and for us," Guerra said.

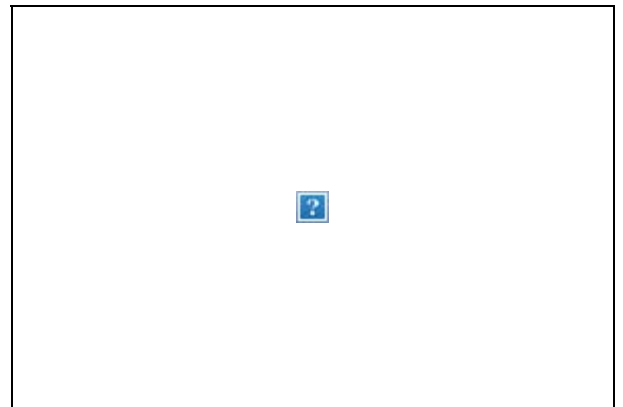
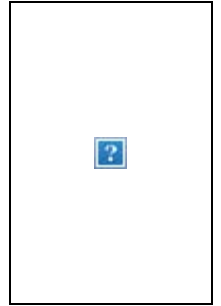
BLM official Jim Talent, standing with Guerra at the Dripping Springs entrance Wednesday as search teams packed up their vehicles, said "we do everything we can to prevent this."

"This is what we don't ever want to see" Talent said.

The death of Odom was the first death of a hiker in the Organ Mountains since December 1999, when 44-year-old Michael Adams of Las Cruces fell from a 75-foot cliff in an area commonly known as the "Needles."

Adams had gone hiking alone, and it took two weeks for a skilled team of rescuers to retrieve his body due to the difficulty of the terrain.

That led to the creation of the Organ Mountain Technical Rescue Squad, which assisted in the extraction of Odom's body Wednesday from Dripping Springs, said Grady Viramontes, the group's training coordinator.



Sylvia Spray, left, stands with Sharon and Roger Odom, the parents of Richard Odom, 21, at the Dripping Springs Visitor Center on Wednesday. Their son died when he suffered a 100-foot fall as he was hiking in the area Tuesday. Sun-News photos by Norm Dettlaff

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