

MILLERTON NEWS

Principal taken hostage, released

By CORY ALLYN

11/10

PINE PLAINS — Christopher Craft, 43, of Stanfordville, surrendered himself to police the morning of Tuesday, Nov. 10, after barricading himself in the middle school office at Stissing Mountain Middle/High School, holding middle school Principal Robert Hess hostage at gunpoint for more than two hours, according to police reports.

At a press conference held at 2 p.m. that day, Dutchess County Sheriff Butch Anderson told reporters that no one was hurt during the incident.

The Associated Press reported that Craft will be charged with first degree kidnapping, criminal possession of a weapon and criminal trespassing.

Anderson said it was premature to speak to Craft's motive or whether he had demanded anything during negotiations, but that as far as law enforcement knew he had no issues with the Pine Plains Central School District. Many reporters questioned Anderson about reports that Craft's son had been in recent trouble with the school, and that Craft himself had a criminal history and a history of confrontation with staff at Stissing Mountain. Anderson would not comment on those claims.

According to an earlier press release by Dutchess County Deputy Sheriff T.J. Hanlon, Craft entered the school at approximately 7:45 a.m. through the main entrance.

"I was walking out of the main doors and he walked right past me," recalled 18-year-old Tom Hazel, who was heading to Dutchess County BOCES that morning. Hazel said he did not see a firearm on Craft. "I just thought it was someone going in."

Twelve-year-old Zack Pruner, a middle school student at Stissing Mountain, was in the adjacent guidance counselor's office calling home when Craft entered the middle school office.

"He started yelling and getting all frustrated," Zack said, "and asking for Mr. Hess. Then he got more violent."

Pruner, who said that Craft didn't know he was in the other room, hid for two hours in the guidance office before signaling to SWAT police officers using his hands and making a written sign explaining there was a man with a gun next door.

After written instruction from the SWAT team, Pruner climbed out of the window and was escorted to safety. When asked where he found the courage to act, he replied, "Most of that stuff comes from my dad and from Boy Scouts."

While Craft barricaded himself in the middle school office, the entire Stissing Mountain building (as well as the neighboring Webutuck Central School District) went into lockdown mode. Last week on Nov. 5 the school held a practice lockdown drill. Pine Plains Board of Education President Helene McQuade said that drills are held routinely throughout the year.

"Lockdown procedure is drilled and drilled and drilled," added board Vice President Bruce Kimball. Both Kimball and McQuade said they felt the school's policies ran smoothly and properly.

Students remained in their classrooms long after Craft was taken away. They were then moved to the town's highway garage while the school was swept and searched.

"The school's emergency plans worked perfectly well," Hanlon reported at the press conference.

Within an hour of Craft entering the building, the main intersection of Pine Plains at routes 199 and 82 was flooded with parents of students, local residents and the press. Over 100 law enforcement officers including the Pine Plains police, sheriff's deputies, New York State Police and Poughkeepsie police were called to the scene. Helicopters from both law enforcement and media outlets circled the town overhead for most of the day.

Parents spent most of the day waiting on Route 199 near Stissing House restaurant for word on when they would see their children. Many reported that their children had texted them with initial information regarding the incident.

Dutchess County Legislator Gary Cooper has two sons in the high school, and one of them texted him with the news early that morning.

"It's against school policy to have a cell phone," Cooper acknowledged, "but you keep it in your pocket, turned off, and when you need it, you got it."

Lisa Puisello has a sixth-grade son who had forgotten his cell phone that morning.

"He will definitely be taking his phone to school tomorrow," she said.

Puisello was one of many who expressed disbelief about the incident.

"How could this happen in Pine Plains?" she asked. "How could this happen in our town?"

"We had drills last week," said Hazel. "But you don't think it will actually happen. It makes everyone want to be cautious. But yeah, I'll go back to school tomorrow."

Hazel added that the school should have a Student Resource Officer. There hasn't been one in Pine Plains for several years.

"I think they're going to need more security at the school," said parent Kathy Milkowski, who has a daughter in the high school. "There were several bomb scares last year and that didn't wake [them up]. I think there should be metal detectors."

McQuade and Kimball said that the school's security measures would be discussed by the entire board before any action was taken.

"The best news is that everybody's safe," McQuade said.

State Assemblyman Marc Molinaro was on the scene throughout the day.

"Obviously this is a shocking and very scary incident for the community, and certainly for the students and staff at the middle school and high school," he said. "But the law enforcement response at all levels was seamless and without flaw. They did a wonderful job and acted very quickly and professionally. Thankfully the incident ended without any violence."

Governor David Paterson commended state and local police for resolving the issue "with professionalism and no injuries" in a statement released to the press on Tuesday.

Parents were gathered at the entrance to the school at 2 p.m., waiting to be let in to see their children for the first time that day. Relief was the one word that kept recurring in conversation about how the day's events unfolded.

When asked the first thing she would say upon seeing her daughter, Milkowski was at a loss for words.

"I'm probably going to give her a hug."







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