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PINE PLAINS STISSING MOUNTAIN SUSPECT CHARGED WITH KIDNAPPING

Suspect blames depression

PINE PLAINS — During his arraignment, a lone gunman who held a middle school principal hostage blamed depression and mental illness.

Christopher Craft, 42, said: "Jail's not the place for me I need to be in a psychiatric center. I'm supposed to get medication [pause] treatment for depression."

Craft, of Stanfordville, was accused of holding Robert Hess, Stissing Mountain Middle School principal, hostage at gunpoint in the school this morning. Hess is OK. The school's students were released to parents.

The gunman was arraigned before Pine Plains Town Justice Louis Imperato. He was not represented by a lawyer and when Imperato asked if he could afford one, he said not at this time.

Craft was arraigned on the top count of kidnapping in the first degree, a class A1 felony. By statute, no bail is set on an A1 felony and he is being returned to jail. His preliminary lawyer will determine if he wants a preliminary or a bail hearing.

Imperato set a tentative date of Dec. 2 at 3 p.m. for Craft to return to court.

The judge told him he would be treated medically for his condition at the jail. He stood quietly with his head looking down at the floor. The proceeding took approximately 7 minutes.

Craft was wearing a long sleeve black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black jeans and gray running shoes. When asked by the judge if he understood his rights, craft said, "Yes, sir."

Craft has previous misdemeanor charges.

Craft's former landlord, William Sherman answered the door at Craft's former Stanfordville residence. Sherman said he had evicted Craft almost two years ago after he owed him six months back rent.

When Sherman finally got into the apartment, he said Craft had trashed it, firing a BB gun at the walls. Sherman said it cost him \$10,000 to fix the apartment.

When asked by a reporter if he had heard about the incident in Pine Plains and if he was surprised by it, he said he had heard about it and, "Frankly, no. He had a temper."

The former landlord said Craft had a bad track record with relationships with women, noting that a couple of women had lived with him in the apartment over the years. He said he often heard a lot of yelling coming from the apartment.

Sherman said Craft took one of the woman's belongings and threw them out on the lawn about three years ago. The state police came to the house to make sure the woman got her belongings and had a place to stay.

In an early afternoon press conference, Dutchess County Sheriff Butch Anderson said Craft was hiding his gun on him when he entered the school and assembled it in the bathroom.

Anderson said Craft then went in and confronted Hess and held him hostage.

A number of negotiators from state police and the Sheriff's Office talked to him on the phone intermittently for 90 minutes. About 9:52 a.m., he agreed to give himself up after speaking with Gary

Mazzacano, senior investigator from the state police.

Craft is being charged with kidnapping in the first degree, a class A1 felony; criminal possession of a weapon in the third degree, a class D felony; and criminal trespassing in the first degree, a class D felony.

Anderson said there was no apparent motive so far and he believed Craft didn't have a problem with anyone at the school.

Maj. William Carey, Troop K commander, said everything went according to protocol and according to plan. Everyone did their jobs, he said.

Anderson commended students and staff for knowing what to do.

Stissing Mountain middle school student and 12-year-old Zack Pruner had called his mother to ask her to bring his homework to school when he heard a man yelling obscenities.

What he witnessed next from the guidance counselor's office made him hide under a desk "frozen with terror," he said.

Pruner saw a gunman walk into the administrative offices and close the door, trapping four people inside, including the school's principal Robert Hess, the dean of students Dennis Malloy, a secretary and an unidentified person.

He could hear yelling but couldn't understand what was being said.

After two hours of hiding, he spotted SWAT police officers and made a sign. It read one gunman with four people inside. Pruner held the sign up for them to see and they responded with a sign telling him to jump out the window to safety. He did.

His mother, Susan Treacy, said: "I'm just very proud of him. Nothing surprised me about Zach."

The school's students were released to parents in the late afternoon.

Pine Plains Superintendent Linda Kaumeyer is expected to give a statement after meeting with faculty and staff.

At 1:15 p.m. parents were told the students were on the buses headed back to the school after it was searched by police and found to be safe, State Police Sgt. Darren Forbes said.

Middle school parents would then be able to sign students out at the middle school library. High School parents were told to do the same at the high school office.

Students were being dismissed in alternating grades.

High school students who drove to school would be allowed to leave after the buses.

Police searched the evacuated school as a safety precaution, while students were held at the town's highway garage, and are eating pizza provided by the American Red Cross.

At 12:30 p.m., state police Sgt. Ed Moore told parents the SWAT teams had nearly cleared the building.

"It's a necessary step to make sure the school is safe," he said.

A press conference was held about noon with Deputy TJ Hanlon of the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office at the Pine Plains library and community center.

Hanlon would not confirm the identity of the gunman, nor his motive, nor would he say what the man's connection was to the school.

Hanlon said a man with a firearm walked into the school about 7:45 a.m. and barricaded himself in a middle school office until about 10 a.m.

State police it was a 9-11 call at 7:52 a.m. that tipped them off to a gunman, possible a parent, in the

school.

State police and the sheriff's office worked to secure the school and negotiated with the man, while the school's emergency plans were put into action.

About 11 a.m., Dutchess County Sheriff Lt. Thomas Lasher announced to parents students would be bused from the school to the town's highway garage.

Dean of students Dennis Malloy said the school was cleared so police could make sure it's safe.

During his announcement, Malloy stressed: "Everyone is safe. All the kids are safe. The principal is safe."

American Red Cross volunteers and mental health workers are on site to provide counseling.

Parents were going through many emotions including shock, disbelief and relief as they wait to hug their children.

"I was shocked, absolutely shocked. You can't believe ... nothing like this happens here," said Christine Rhodes, parent of 10th-grader Aaron Rhodes.

The district's Web site states the building includes grades 6 to 12. The high school enrollment is about 400 students and middle school includes about 270 students.

"We have to provide the counseling to the students who need it and figure out the best way to reunite students and parents. They are working on that," Pine Plains Town Supervisor Gregg Pulver said.

Bruce Kimball, vice president of the school's board of education, said a lockdown drill was held Nov. 5 to practice for an emergency situation.

"Everyone did the right thing and knew what to do today," Kimball said.

He added: "This turned out the best way it could."

A large gathering of concerned parents, many on cell phones, gathered outside the Stissing Mountain House restaurant waiting for their children. The restaurant is on Route 199 near the intersection of Main Street.

During the peak of the hostage situation, some parents reported being able to text message their students who were locked inside.

Parent Gary Cooper, 50, of Pine Plains, said his 14-year-old son Justin sent him a text at 8:26 a.m. It read: "We are in lockdown there is somebody in the school with a gun there is cops everywhere its crazy."

Justin Cooper later texted he was OK and being held at the town highway garage to his father's relief.

Parent Jill Smith received a text from her daughter Marsadie, 16. Smith said she helped her daughter stay calm.

"It's wonderful to be able to talk to her," Jill Smith said.

About 10 a.m., Nancy Kotzur's two sons were at the school and she was waiting on a nearby road for word from them.

Kotzur said she heard from a distance the gunman had been captured.

"Everyone started clapping and then we heard he was captured, now we're waiting for the children to be released," she said.

Kotzur said she tried reaching her children but had no luck.

"One son's phone rang and rang. One son quickly picked up and then hung up, it sounded like he whispered something," she said.

About 9:30 a.m., officer John Hughes, with the Pine Plains Police Department, confirmed there was a subject with a gun. At that time, Hughes said about 100 children had been evacuated and taken to the town's highway garage. Only law enforcement were allowed near the school on Church Street.

At 8:45 a.m., a parent of two students who were held in the school, Bob Lamont, said officials were saying a gunman had one hostage trapped in the middle school principal's office.

"There's been no shooting as far as we know," Lamont, a Pine Plains resident, said.

Meanwhile, Lamont's two children were not answering their cell phones.

"I tried to get them and I can't get either of them. My daughter's phone is going right to voice mail," he said.

Laura and Carlos Maisonet, of Clinton Corners, were parents on the scene.

Their child, Brandon Maisonet, a seventh-grader, was evacuated, but Brandon's brother, Justin Maisonet, a ninth-grader, was still in the school.

"You hear about Columbine and everything else, then you turn around and it's happening in your neighborhood. It scares the daylights out of you," Carlos Maisonet said.

According to its Web site, the Pine Plains Central School District covers 140 square miles and includes the towns of Pine Plains, Stanford and parts of the towns of Ancram, Clermont, Clinton, Gallatin, Livingston, Milan and Northeast. The majority of the residents reside in the Towns of Pine Plains and Stanford. The district serves approximately 1,174 students.

Gov. David Paterson, in a written statement, said: "At this hour it appears the hostage situation at Pine Plains High School in Dutchess County has ended. I want to commend state and local police for their efforts in resolving this situation with professionalism and no injuries. We will continue to monitor the situation closely, but I speak for all New Yorkers when offering my sincere gratitude to our fine public safety officials who have once again served New York State well."

Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, R-Red Hook, called today's events "frightening." In an e-mail, he said: "Schools are to be sanctuaries for our students; places where our children can learn and socialize free from harm. We can all breathe a sigh of relief knowing the gunman who held an assistant principal hostage today was captured without incident."

Molinaro added: "Standing outside the school with law enforcement, local government officials, and school administrators, we remain confident that our community will endure and grow stronger from this unthinkable act. In the days ahead, we will work together to ensure our children are safe and do all that we can to restore the quality of life, as well as the security of our community."

At 8:15 a.m., Sheriff's deputy TJ Hanlon described the situation as "very fluid." Hanlon declined to comment on the nature of the incident or confirm the gunman was arrested.

He said police had set up a perimeter around the school.

Red Hook resident Bill Moore said he watched about 14 police vehicles drive by his home this morning as of 8:30 a.m. He lives a few miles away from the high school, he said.

"We've been counting them as they go by because normally for an accident you might have two or three cars," he said.

Moore said he'd seen about four state police vehicles, one Dutchess County Sheriff's Office vehicle and several unmarked police cars with lights flashing in the area of Route 308.

Members of the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office were assisted by the New York State Police; City and Town of Poughkeepsie police; Dutchess County Probation; Pine Plains police and fire departments; Pine Plains Supervisor Gregg Pulver; Northern Dutchess Paramedics; Dutchess County Department of Emergency Response; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; FBI; and the Dutchess County District Attorney's Office.