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UPDATED with more details of rescue: 'It's a miracle that she survived' DA Clark recounts rescue of employee

Becky Campbell Sep 21, 2015 Updated Jul 5, 2020



Craig Hays, in red jacket, hugs Haywood County Sheriff Greg Christopher in relief after learning that rescuers had found his wife, Julie Hays. (Ailison Olcsway/Mountaineer Publishing, Inc.)

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It was supposed to be a day hike, but it turned into a days-long ordeal for Washington County Assistant District Attorney Julie Hays — and for friends, family and rescuers as well.

But 65 hours after Hays began the ill-fated trek in the Western North Carolina mountains, a search and rescue team [carried her out alive and safe](#), but injured.

When District Attorney General Tony Clark first saw her strapped into a rescue basket on the back of an ATV before she was taken to an Asheville hospital, Hays had a quick message for him.

"Sorry, boss."

Her quip brought laughter in the darkness of the mountain's early morning, a world apart from the mood during the preceding hours, when Hays' fate was unknown.



Hays, 49, left her Jonesborough home around 7 a.m. Saturday headed to North Carolina prepared for a day hike. When she failed to return home late Saturday, her husband, Craig Hays, called authorities to report her missing, according to Haywood County Sheriff's Sgt. Heidi Warren.

Hays had left a note on her car indicating that she started her trek at 10 a.m., so rescuers knew the general area where to begin the search. They basically began the search with the knowledge that Hays, an experienced day hiker, was on a difficult trail — a portion of the Art Loeb trail on Cold Mountain — and no one had heard from her.

She was eventually found about four miles back and 100 yards off the trail in the Lenoir Creek area on the north side of Cold Mountain. The terrain was so harsh that once rescuers heard a woman's voice answer their calls, it took 45 minutes to an hour to reach her.

But before the joyous find, around 3 a.m. Sunday a group of search and rescue personnel from the Haywood County, N.C. area were at the trail head ready to hit the wilderness to search for Hays. The thick forest and rocky terrain, even on the trail, would prove difficult at best for even experienced searchers. A fog that settled on Cold Mountain didn't help matters.

As the day wore on, searchers kept coming up empty, and another night fell on the mountain with no sign of Hays. Monday, more rescue personnel showed up from three states — North Carolina, South Carolina and Hays' Washington County community in Tennessee — to render as much aid as possible.



Johnson City Police Capt. Brian Rice said he heard about Hays being missing late Sunday afternoon.

"By chance, I happened to call TBI Special Agent Scott Lott on an unrelated matter. He was with District Attorney General Tony Clark on their way to North Carolina and explained what was going on," Rice said Tuesday. Rice volunteered to get a group of officers together to head to the mountain to help, and once Lott and Clark got to the scene and made that offer, the plan began to develop.

"Within a couple of hours, we had a team of 11 officers and myself who volunteered to go," Rice said. All the officers went to help on their own time, he said.

Rice, who is on light duty due to a knee injury, said he worked the command post while other city officers were divided up onto search teams.

"They spent the entire day humping those mountains," he said. Clark was with Rice at the command post waiting to hear any news about Hays.

"I went up Sunday when I heard," Clark said Tuesday morning, adding that word spread quickly that Hays was missing. "I've never seen the outpouring of support. Every agency from my district and agencies from surrounding districts called to offer help."

Clark said officials were able to get cellphone records and pinged Hays' phone to see where she made calls from or where she tried to make calls from. Other resources included dog teams and a helicopter was on standby.

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"Everyone called with concern for Julie," he said. "So many people called and wanted to help search, but Haywood County, this is what they do. They only wanted people who were trained because of the difficulty of terrain. By Monday afternoon, it was getting to the point that we knew if there was another night, it could be bad. It's a miracle that she survived."

Rice gave similar comments about the feeling at the command post.

"The dangers jumped exponentially every night she was out in those elements, especially if she was injured," Rice said. Search crews were headed back to the command post for more planning and the last two groups were still out around 5:45 p.m. Monday when they heard a faint answer after calling Hays' name.

It was a woman's voice calling for help. But they couldn't see her or find her right away.

"The location was extremely rugged," Rice said. "We were cautiously optimistic it was Julie, but we didn't know until they got to her. If it wasn't her, we knew we had another female lost. The terrain was horrendous."

It took about an hour from the time the rescuers heard Hays' call back to them to the time they reach her, Rice said.

"The radio call that they had her," was exciting to hear, but "the game's not over until the game's over," Rice said. "We knew it was going to be a struggle to get her out. What was anticipated to take two to three hours took eight hours."

That next step in the rescue would take searchers until 3 a.m. cutting a path down Cold Mountain.

"It took eight hours to get her out; 37 search and rescue personnel were with her when they brought her out. They had to saw down trees, and lift her by ropes in some areas," Clark said. "It wasn't the trail. They brought her down the mountain through the woods."

Clark said the wait was excruciating.

"Emotionally, you're hoping, but as every few minutes go by, if she's out there and alive, there's less chance she will be," Clark said. But seeing Hays just before she was put into an ambulance "was one of the happiest moments of my life."

Looking back at the mission, Rice said he was impressed with the expertise of the North Carolina rescuers.

"Hats off to those guys. I was very impressed with the overall quality of the operation. They're a top-notch crew," he said. "The takeaway is we were bringing Julie home to her family and friends. That's what was important."

After her rescue from the mountain Hays took a moment to thank her rescuers before she was transported to Mission Hospital in Asheville, where she remained Tuesday in stable condition.

"She was thanking everyone around her," Rice said.

Hays' injuries reportedly included a separated shoulder and possibly a broken foot.

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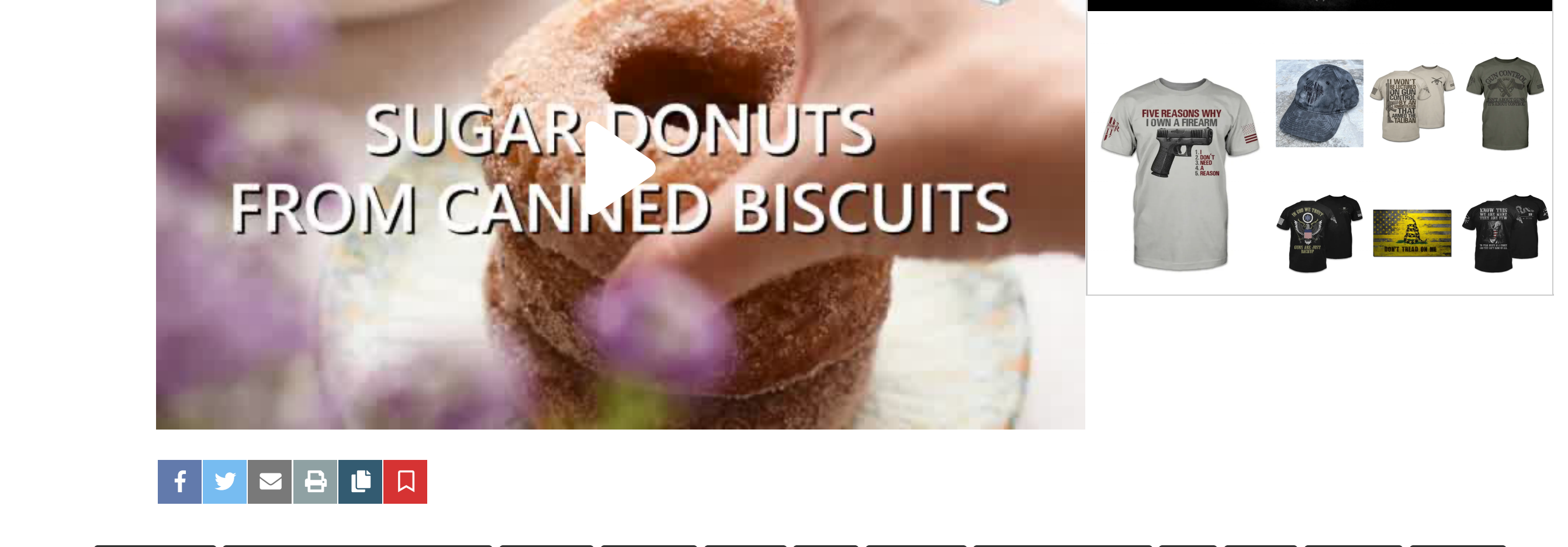
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