

Downed planes, missing persons test skills of search-rescue unit

March 21, 1993 | By Frank Langfitt | Frank Langfitt, Staff Writer

The cold wind blew so hard that Kelly Naylor's eyelids froze shut. Even when they reopened, she could not see the piles of rocks marking the trail. The swirling snow had obliterated them.

At 15, the girl from Columbia was climbing New Hampshire's Mount Washington.

In February.

Suddenly, the snow where she stood gave way and she began to slide down the mountain. She drove her ice ax into the snow as she had been trained to do and eventually came to a stop.

"It was probably only 20 or 30 feet," she said of the slide. But "it seemed like forever."

Kelly was on the mountain that day in 1990 as part of her training with Columbia's Explorer Search & Rescue Post 616. The volunteer organization was established in Howard County in 1985 and is the only one of its kind in Maryland.

The members, who range from high school students to people in their 50s, assist in finding downed planes and lost people in some of the more hostile conditions in the eastern United States.

Over the years, they have trudged through swamps, forests and deep snow searching for shards of fuselage or lost children. Once a member led a team that discovered a downed plane during the largest search in the history of Virginia.

Last week, the group was on call to help find the Michigan high school students lost in the snow of the Great Smoky Mountains. The alert was called off after the students were found last Tuesday.

Kelly said she was drawn to the group because of the challenge and the way it brings people together. She described the unique experience of camping in the snow:

"You're trying to get dressed and you haven't seen your skin in a couple days because you just always have long underwear on and you're trying to change real fast and cooking meals and then it snows . . . and then your pot spills with your hot water.

"It's fun," she says, "and it's really trying."

Trevor Meeks, 17, from Columbia, first heard about the group over the public address system at Oakland Mills High School. Up until then, his most outdoorsy activity had been a 10-mile hike along the Appalachian Trail.

Trevor now manages the group's mountain rescue unit. He and Kelly have at least \$1,000 worth of equipment each that they use for searches and training. They include crampons with 1 1/2 -inch metal spikes, snowshoes and large plastic mountaineering boots.

The group keeps its equipment in a storage locker in Columbia. When a state emergency services agency or a sheriff's department calls for a search, those available pile into a 1986 Chevrolet Suburban and head out.

They often arrive the next morning in the mountains somewhere between Pennsylvania and Virginia. After receiving instructions, they venture into the hills, searching for clues. The group, which has 33 members, goes out on about 20 such calls a year.

The Explorer post operates on a shoestring, with an annual budget of no more than \$9,000. Teen-age members and their adult advisers raise the money by delivering phone books.

The eight-door Suburban is a former airport stretch limousine with more than 400,000 miles on it. With its red and yellow running lights and roof rack, it's a ringer for the vehicle in the "Ghostbusters" movies.

The group is part of the Boy Scouts of America and is devoted to developing leadership skills among high school students. Four members became Eagle Scouts this year, said Peter McCabe, the group's 56-year-old adviser.

The group meets at the Howard County Community College in Columbia and trains at least one weekend a month. Training includes survival skills, wilderness navigation, rappelling and rock climbing.

Kelly Naylor is now a 17-year-old junior at Oakland Mills High School. Last month, she returned to Mount Washington to help lead the group's annual training session there.

Her earlier experience seems not to have fazed her. During the recent trip, she climbed a 500-foot ice wall with several other members in the middle of a snowstorm.

"That," she says, "was really exciting."