

Finding toddler in Farmington Sig's first big case

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FARMINGTON — Conservation Officer Mark Hensel of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department said he will never forget the moment he and his beloved dog Sig, an almost 2-year-old black lab, found 19-month-old Liam Davis in the woods.

"(Sig) led me about 150 feet in and he happened to be sitting right by where little Liam was. He was laying in some moss and actually covered in ferns," Hensel said. "He was just so small, you could have walked right by him and not seen him."

At about 9:30 p.m. Thursday night, a full-blown search party was organized with dozens of authorities and civilians trudging through the thick brush near Russell Lane and Ten Rod Road. Liam's mother Brittany Adjutant said the baby went missing at about 7 p.m. and reported it to Farmington police at about 8 p.m. The boy was found at 11:39 p.m. by Hensel and returned to the mother without injury.

Police said the baby crawled out of a tent near the family's campground when Adjutant went to get firewood and left her tent unzipped.

Hensel described the scene as emotional. He said he knelt down to pick up Liam, who had suffered some visible mosquito bites in the four hours since he went missing Thursday night. He added the young boy "latched onto" him and seemed like he wanted to go home.

"He was in pretty good condition, I thought. He was sleeping at the time. I woke him up and he was sleepy, but when he woke up, I picked him up and he latched onto me," he said. "He actually didn't cry at all ... He was really happy to be found, as I think anybody would be."

Hensel said this is his K9 unit's first big case. Before working with the still green Sig, in his 12 years with the department, Hensel said he worked closely with Poacher, another black Lab K9 who has since retired and lives in Hensel's home along with Sig in Wakefield.

He explained his work with the dogs is crucial for getting the job done effectively. He added he and his loyal companion patrol the lakes region on a daily basis, seven days a week, to track scents of criminal acts related to illegal fishing and hunting, as well as search and rescue efforts.

"He lives with me & He's with me now," Hensel said over the phone, from the road as the two trucked around in a department vehicle. "You need to be able to communicate. You have to work as a team, read the dog, and work together. The bonding that goes on is absolutely crucial. Any handler has to have that and work together with them."

He said when Sig sensed Liam in the dark woods that night, the dog communicated through "behavior change," which Hensel picked up on. As Sig scoured the rugged terrain off Ten Rod Road, he said it was about an hour-and-a-half before the baby was spotted and the search was over. He added he wouldn't have guessed he and his four-legged partner would be the ones to rescue the toddler.

"I guess at some point everybody hopes that they have a successful find," Hensel explained. "Whoever does that, the goal is you try to work as a team with all the searchers and the officers out there. You have



Officer Mark Hensel of the N.H. Fish and Game Department with his dog, Sig, who found the 19-month-old toddler lost in the woods in Farmington Thursday night.

an assignment, with whatever the capabilities are, (and) in my case, it's the K9 ; We worked very well together in order to bring a situation like this to an end." He cited in his time with his previous pooch Poacher, the dog assisted in the apprehension of a Wolfeboro truck thief, a bank robber, participated in 14 search and rescues, and assisted in numerous homicide and trespassing cases. He said perhaps Sig will have just as an impressive a rap sheet.

Behind the Wakefield Police Department near downtown Sanbornville, Sig excitedly jumped and barked, running around some nearby grass. Hensel joked Sig is a bit of a workaholic, who gets anxious if there isn't any tracking to do. He noted while the dog doesn't particularly like to be pet, he is incredibly friendly. With the quick command "Load up!" Sig hopped into the back of the SUV and sat on his bed in the backseat, with his head poking out the side window.

Hensel said Sig's hard work this week points to the continual need for support of the state's K9 program. He said at this point, Sig and just one other dog make up New Hampshire Fish and Game's K9 department, but insisted there should be more. He said he is constantly driving all over the state, nearly everyday of the week, and more patrolling help is needed. He encouraged people to visit the New Hampshire Wildlife Heritage Foundation's website, which he said contributed to Sig's training and works to provide more resources to the department. "That's something we're trying to do, to help get the word out about the only way we are able to fund our K9 program," he said. "We have an organization that helps us out with that, the conservation K9 account with the Wildlife Heritage Foundation. They're directly responsible for taking care of Sig, as far as providing training and equipment ; As an agency, we don't have a way to do that."