

Speaker 1: The search continues right now for a missing Rocklin hiker. Cody Micheal was last seen Sunday when he and his dog left to go camping along the Loch Leven Trail in Placer County.

Speaker 2: The search for missing hiker Cody Micheal and his dog continues tonight near Donner Summit.

Cody Michael: My feet are freezing. My shoes are soaking wet.

Cody Michael: Yesterday was when I was like, "I'm in serious trouble. I don't know where I am."

Chris Gray: Hi, this is Chris Gray.

Scotty Sandow: I'm Scotty Sandow.

Chris Gray: Welcome to the Placer Life. Today we're bringing you the story about being lost in the wilderness. You probably remember this story. Back in May, 23-year-old guy from Rocklin, Cody Michael, thinks he's going on just an overnight hike, him and his dog, up at the Loch Leven Lakes Trail at Donner Summit. Finds himself lost for four days and he thinks possibly forever.

Scotty Sandow: Our story starts here.

Cody Michael: It was a little bit different than what I was expecting. I guess I'm not the most prepared. I'm a little too adventurous for my own good.

Scotty Sandow: This is Cody Micheal.

Cody Michael: I'm a deputy probation officer for Placer County. I work at the Juvenile Detention Facility. I supervise the kids that are in custody at the juvenile hall and work with them. Safety and security for them and us is the number one priority, but just working with them, trying to get them back out into society and help them change their ways.

Chris Gray: Here's his plan. It's his first solo overnight trip. He's got his dog, Bower, German Shepard. Wearing shorts and a t-shirt, he's got a tent, got some food, and he's gonna go up the Loch Leven Lakes Trail. It's a decently hard hike, but it's a popular hike in Placer County. It's about seven miles, 1,600 feet in elevation gain or so, basically up the side of a mountain, lot of switchbacks getting up there, but you're rewarded at the top of them, absolutely stunning view of the Loch Leven Lakes.

Cody Michael: I went and collected my own stuff for the month of May. I just had the freeze-dried, backpacking Mountain House food. I just heated that up or boiled it in my Jetboil. I at those and I brought a few Clif bars and that kind of stuff, but those were long gone by Monday at 11 o'clock. What I didn't have was a GPS or a

compass. Most people don't even need that. You just have that foundational navigational skills. Unfortunately, I didn't have that either.

Chris Gray: Another thing he's not prepared for, snow. Last May there was still some snow in the Sierra. As he heads up the mountain with the ground still covered in it, Cody has no trail to follow.

Cody Michael: It was just a last-minute thing. I was about 15 minutes away from the trail head, and I just figure I know my mom worries, and a lot more so than my dad, but I just texted my dad because we went previously and he's familiar with it and I just said, "Hey, at the Loch Leven trail head. Backpacking. Be back tomorrow." That probably saved my life, to be honest. If I didn't do that, I probably wouldn't be here.

Pretty much as soon as I got to the top, or not at the lakes, but at the top of the mountain, I think I was a little off to the right of the lakes, I set up camp real quick because it started raining, and so pretty much my whole Sunday backpacking was just getting up there, setting up as fast as possible, and sitting in my tent all the way until the next morning, because it wasn't pouring, but it was raining pretty good.

Chris Gray: Uneventful Sunday night. You're ready to come back. At some point you send a message to your family, right?

Cody Michael: Yeah.

Cody Michael: Update part two for Alexa.

Scotty Sandow: Alexa's Cody's sister.

Cody Michael: My shoes are soaking wet. My feet are freezing. Bower's playing in the snow.

Cody Michael: I knew I wasn't on the trail, but I thought I was heading in a direction that would take me to those switchbacks. I should've stopped at that point because I knew I wasn't where I needed to be, but I didn't think it was that big of a deal to where I was way far off, I thought if I just kept heading down in this direction I'd run into the switchbacks and I'd be fine from there, but unfortunately that wasn't the case.

Howard Michael: I had a dinner meeting that night and got home around 7:30 is what I recall.

Chris Gray: That's Cody's dad.

Howard Michael: Hi, I'm Howard Michael, and I'm the father of Cody Michael. I remember sitting down on the couch and starting going through my normal decompression period after a long hard day's work. Then it dawned on me that I hadn't seen his vehicle.

Chris Gray: Cody's a recent Sac State grad. He was still living his folks at the time.

Howard Michael: Other than that, life just was normal. I asked his mom if she had heard from him. Dana said that she had not, and it immediately struck me. I called CHP. She had gotten his vehicle identification information so that we could pass that along. I asked CHP if they had a unit in the area. They said they do have one nearby and they could send somebody over to check.

We gave them the vehicle information, they checked, called back in about 15 minutes, and they said, "Yeah, his vehicle's still there." By this time, it's almost completely dark, so it's probably around 8:30 at night I'm guessing. I immediately replied, "That's not good." I remember the dispatcher echoing that, saying, "Yeah, that's not good." I said, "All right, well we're on our way up." By the time I got up there, there was a sheriff unit and a CHP unit waiting for our arrival.

Scotty Sandow: Once you got onto the scene there and you recognize that something's happening here, describe that feeling.

Howard Michael: That's a terrible feeling, and not one I ever want to experience again. I still held out hope, knowing that he's in great shape and he's got a good dog with him, and like I said, he's got the means of which to protect himself, so I figured he maybe just ... I knew something was not right, because he wouldn't just hang out there and do various things. Something just wasn't right. We figured he must be hurt, either the dog got hurt and he's looking for the dog, or the dog got lost. Thoughts start to wander. Start to wonder why that would've occurred. It's completely out of the ordinary.

I pressed myself to maintain a positive mindset while we waited for the CHP helicopter to arrive and fly the mountain. We were hopeful that doing that that evening, which they did, that they would find them quickly and then this would just be a short-lived experience, but that wasn't the case.

Cody Michael: I started going down the side of the mountain, and I knew I was way far off from where I needed to be, because the terrain was awful. You had to bushwhack, and I had to pick Bower up and go through bushes. It was really dangerous, just to be honest. I knew it wasn't like those nice switchbacks.

Chris Gray: Instead of heading north back to the trail head as he hoped, he steadily drifts south through one of the most rugged sections of the county, toward the Upper Royal Gorge of the American River Canyon.

Cody Michael: At that point I thought maybe I should just climb back up this stuff and try to get back down towards those switchbacks, but the terrain was so rough that I don't even know if I could've made it back up, so I didn't really have an option. I had to go down. There were lots of those natural streams. It was easier to walk in that stuff than it was to the side because it was just dangerous cliffs and thick,

thick brush that was up above my waist. I'd have to carry Bower and just walk through it. It obviously wasn't pleasant to walk through that stuff. We actually walked in the natural streams, almost like a little river, and just followed that.

My thinking behind that was I knew there was a waterfall at the bottom of the Loch Leven Trail, and I was thinking that that would hopefully connect me back to that water source. That's really what I did. I really thought that if I followed that for however long I needed to, that even though I wasn't on the trail and it started swinging off to the left and I knew I needed to go to the right, but I really figured that that would probably swing back around and take me where I needed to go, so I blindly followed that, which was the first big mistake I made.  
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here was bear stool all over. I knew we were not in a good spot. I could see fresh footprints because it rained the night before. I'm not an expert with that stuff, but I was pretty sure they were pretty fresh. They were monstrous footprints, or bear paw prints, whatever you want to call them. I knew we were getting into an area where they were probably at. I was a little bit more alert, looking around.

At one point I got a little bit relaxed, and I was just walking, looking at the ground, tired at that point, knew I wasn't where I needed to be, and was stressing about that, and then all of a sudden he just took off. The fur stood up on his back. It was the most aggressive bark I've ever heard from him. He took off and I looked up, and there was a bear probably 100 feet away or so. It took off. I called for him. Fortunately, he stopped.

Chris Gray: Just pause there for a second. That happens to you. Your dog chases a bear off, and you're telling that story for years, right?

Scotty Sandow: That's just a footnote in the overall story of your getting lost.

Chris Gray: That's nuts.

Cody Michael: Never in a million years did I think that I'd go out backpacking and get lost like this. My first few things when I go backpacking is bears, mountain lions. That's what I would think would happen if it was going to take a turn for the wrong. If it was going to go bad, I thought that would be it. I was prepared for something like that, but I wasn't prepared for this.

Ty Conners: Majority of the time it always seems to happen at two in the morning or 12 at night and all of us are sleeping.

Scotty Sandow: This is Sergeant Ty Conners with the Placer County Sheriff's Office. He leads a lot of the search and rescue efforts along the I-80 Corridor.

Ty Conners: When we do that call, we can assess the situation, we look at condition of the person, their health, do they have medical issues, are they experienced, do they have equipment. Weather conditions are huge, if it's going to be freezing at night or not. There's a lot of factors we go into it to find out. Then the safety of our own volunteers, sending them out into a situation, if it's real late at night and there's a snowstorm coming, that we're probably going to wait. There's a lot of factors that go into that.

Once we do make that decision, it goes on to it's called an envoy call-out, where I call the next person, basically tell them what we need, depending on that search. We called for ground searchers and K-9 handlers. Then we also asked for motorcycle and four-by-four teams, because we're looking at the area. It's called a hasty search. We go out and just try and throw people out in the field as fast as possible. We mainly search known trail systems to look for signs.

Once we do that call-out though, then we give a location where the [inaudible 00:11:14] is at, and give them an arrival time when they're going to show up. Then once all the searchers come, we come up with our plan and start sending out assignments.

Sam Shane: The end of day one of the search, there's still no sign of Cody Michaels, the 23-year-old Rocklin man who went hiking near Donner Summit with his dog and has not been seen since. Good evening, I'm Sam Shane.

Christina James: I'm Christina James. The family last heard from him on Monday morning.

Cody Michael: 4:50, every single morning, I'd wake up. Obviously I didn't have an alarm. My phone was dead. 4:50 every morning, as soon as that sun just barely started peeking up, I would get up, pack up my stuff, and I started going. I'd just hike that whole entire day from 4:50 in the morning until eight, 8:30 at night, just trying to get out, following the streams. It obviously didn't work out, but I was just thinking that these streams have to flow back towards that waterfall. I wasted time going one way for maybe five, eight miles to a dead-end waterfall, and then I'd have to hike that back, so that's half the day wasted right there. Then I'd have to pick a different direction because I was just so disoriented I didn't know where I was. I didn't know where to go.

Scotty Sandow: How many miles do you think you were hiking on Tuesday? Rough guess.

Cody Michael: Over 20. Over 20, I really do, because I'd hike for three four hours to go one way, and it'd be a dead-end waterfall, I'd have to hike that back and then go another way. It was a lot.

Chris Gray: Are you even looking for anything edible out there? Would you have known what might have been?

- Cody Michael: At that point, towards the end of the day, Tuesday maybe, but the earlier portion of it, I was just so focused on getting out. When you have hope, I had hope, it was early, I had so much time, and I'd follow these streams or I'd pick a direction and think, "All right, I'll just hike this for five miles. I have to run into something good." The food's not really on your mind. Towards the end of the day, you feel like nothing's working, you're hopeless, then the hunger starts to set in. I was looking for stuff. Yeah, I was.
- Scotty Sandow: On Monday night you'd told yourself, "All right, this kind of sucks, but I'll get through it. I'm just going to find my way out." How did that change on Tuesday night?
- Cody Michael: That changed. That changed. I was definitely starting to get pretty worried at that point. I had slipped. I don't like to make this over-dramatic or whatever, but I slipped that night by that waterfall. I was barefoot, which wasn't smart, but my shoes were soaking wet. I don't even know if I told anybody this, but I slipped and slammed my foot into a rock, and I thought I broke it. I could barely walk. It was fortunately just a bone bruise, which don't feel good. That night actually I woke up probably 20 times just from the pain of that and just not being in the most comfortable sleeping spot. I was really worried that I wasn't even going to be physically able to hike out of there.
- Speaker 2: The search for missing hiker Cody Micheal and his dog continues tonight near Donner Summit. A National Guard Lakota helicopter will fly the area with thermal-seeking cameras and night vision. That's according to a Placer County Sheriff's Office Facebook post tonight.
- Ty Conners: What happens if we exhaust our resources that we have and we need to add on to our searches and personnel, then we go through Cal OES, and we put in a call to them, it's a county Mutual Aid, and tell them what we need, that we need 30 type one ground searchers, we need more K-9. At that point they broadcast that out to the other county search and rescue teams to see if they can provide somebody.
- Scotty Sandow: What kind of assets or equipment is being utilized in a search like this?
- Ty Conners: This one I think we used everything except the kitchen sink. Again, we had K-9 out there trying to do different searches. We had our ground searchers, motorcycle, four-by-four team. We also went through National Guard with the helicopters, CHB's helicopter, and then the Air Force also brought in a helicopter to do night vision at night time, and they also brought in this nanotechnology to where it's real life as far as trackers, so we can see our searchers real time, which was very beneficial to see where they're at. I was stunned by the Air Force. It really was a huge effort on that.
- Scotty Sandow: Nanotechnology.

Ty Conners: Yes. It was pretty trick. You're sitting in the command post and you're looking on a Google Map image and you're seeing each person as they're hiking around.

Scotty Sandow: I've only seen that sort of thing in movies. Usually it involves aliens.

Ty Conners: It was something I've never dealt with before either. They're really trying to push that out for search and rescue teams, because then again, you really can see your search patterns and where they're at, because what happens with us is that we have GPS and they do their way points and cookie crumbs as you're hiking along. We can't download that until the teams get back from their search. Then you download that and you can pose it on your map and you can see where they searched. Their technology that they had, we had it live-time, so we didn't have to wait.

Speaker 10: Family of a missing Rocklin hiker holding out hope tonight after day two comes to an end and still no sign of their son.

Speaker 11: Cody Michaels was expected to return Monday.

Cody Michael: I remember waking up Wednesday saying, "I have to get out of here. If I don't get out of here today, I'm in serious trouble. To be honest, I might not make it."

Dr. Rob Oldham: After a few days, even with mild dehydration, it compounds a little each day.

Chris Gray: That's Dr. Rob Oldham, Placer County's Public Health Officer.

Dr. Rob Oldham: Where you could just really give up and start making poor decisions and have just total mental and physical fatigue.

Cody Michael: I was going to jump into that river, and which I found out later that it was 60 miles to the next highway or whatever, next location where I would've been okay, in Forest Hill. If I didn't have Bower, I probably would've done that, and I wouldn't have made it.

Ty Conners: We did have our opportunity where I took Cody's dad with us to the top of the mountain to get a good perspective. We went up in the Blackhawk because we had to set a repeater up for our communications, so I asked him to go, which is not very common, we don't get them involved that much, but I really wanted him to get a good idea of what we're dealing with. Then once he saw that, it definitely was an eye-opener for him.

Howard Michael: My eyes were glued out the window looking down, just looking for any kind of sign. Then we get up to the top of the mountain. The helicopter can't touch down exactly. It's not a level mountain of course, so there's no pad up there, so they got close. Those pilots are amazing how they can control those big machines. We all just bailed out. They went up and set up their repeater station. I and the sergeant and one of the deputies walked around a big 360-degree

circle around that mountain looking for any kind of sign. I've got a whistle that I use for Bower, any of our animals, and the kids have heard it all their lives, so they would know it was me in a heartbeat if they heard it, so I was doing my whistle, hoping to hear something in return, a bark, a shout, a cry, something.

Ty Conners: It was a sad thing, seeing his dad out there whistling for his son and not getting any reply back.

Howard Michael: The gravity of the situation was becoming more intense for me. Again, I could see the weight on my wife. I knew driving home that night, that was going to be a very difficult drive home.

Chris Gray: Thursday morning, day four.

Cody Michael: I probably woke up at about seven and just sat there. I did walk around and look for food. I was trying to find squirrels and anything I could possibly find, because I was really hungry at that point. I knew Bower had to have been too, so that's what I was doing that morning. I started another fire. I was grabbing green, I don't know exactly what they are, but green brush that makes the fire smoke. I was trying to make the smokiest fire I possibly could to signal someone, but it doesn't work like the experts make it on TV. I tried that. I went around looking for food. Bower was just in the tent the whole day.

Chris Gray: He's got some duct tape in his pack, figures why not, tapes the word "help" on a nearby rock.

Cody Michael: A helicopter flew directly above me. I don't know who it was, could've been a private helicopter. I think it was probably someone with search and rescue and the whole operation. Like I've said and plenty of people have said, you have to have bright clothing out there. They won't see you. You're like an ant. You're a needle in a haystack.

Scotty Sandow: When that helicopter, when you thought, "I'm close enough. There's a good shot here," and the helicopter flies away, what's going through your head?

Cody Michael: That was rough. I really thought that was it. I didn't think I was going to make it. For me, it was like, "If they're not going to see me, there's no way this is going to happen." Waking up Thursday, it was like, "I don't know. I'm just a 23-year-old guy. I'm one person." I had a hard time thinking that this far into it, it's Thursday morning now, I knew my parents would be trying to get someone or doing anything they possibly could, but I was so far out at that point. I started to doubt that there would be anyone looking for me at that point.

I really thought, "If they were looking for me, if a CHP helicopter did go out there, maybe they would've called it by now." It's just one person, to be honest. I don't know, but that's really what I was thinking. That was probably the most

crushing blow I've ever ... That was not fun, because I thought that was going to be it. I thought I was just going to have to sit up there and die.

Chris Gray: At this point, if you can call it luck, Cody really has been. The weather's been reasonably temperate. It's been warm during the day, but on Thursday, that's all going to change. He doesn't know it yet, but there's a huge snowstorm forecast for that evening and the temperature's going to plummet.

Scotty Sandow: He's soaking wet. He's wearing shorts. He's not prepared for the snow. The searchers know that, and so do his parents.

Howard Michael: I had stayed optimistic and hopeful that they would find them. We had some pretty interesting stories to tell after they got them off the mountain, but on Thursday, driving up, my thoughts shifted pretty hard, and I began to prepare. What I thought I needed to do was prepare for the worst. I remember my sister-in-law driving me up, and I wouldn't have used those words and didn't around my wife at all, but I did around my sister-in-law. Then I told her I think we need to prepare ourselves for the worst.

Cody Michael: From probably a mile to two miles away, I could hear it. I started to get up because I could hear it coming. I knew something was coming. As soon as it came over, my first thought was, "There's no way that thing's out here for me, but I'm going to get its attention."

When it was getting closer and I finally realized that it saw me, I didn't stop. I was jumping, I was swinging that poncho thing around. I was doing anything I could to get its attention. Then one of the guys slid open the side of the helicopter the door, and I think I gave him a thumbs up and a signal like, "I see you." Once I realized he saw me, that was probably the best feeling I'll ever have in my entire life. Went from the worst an hour before to that it was I was probably shaking. I don't even know. It was the greatest feeling I've ever had in my life and probably will be.

Howard Michael: This Blackhawk flew right over the top of us, and I knew instantly that that meant something. I just didn't know what. This woman who was very serious and in charge, doing her job extremely well, is the one I'm expecting to walk out of the command post and walk our way, and sure enough, the door opens, and she comes walking out. I remember looking at my wife, and I said, "I think she's got good news." We were just stationed there. We just stood there. We didn't walk toward her. We just stood there waiting for her to walk toward us. She was closing this 40-yard gap. She got about halfway, and a little more than halfway away from us, I guess, and she says, "I know if I ever need a miracle in my life, I know which family I come and ask to pray."

My wife, being completely moved by that statement, just hit the ground. I remember clapping my hands and walking toward the command post officer at that point and just giving her a big hug. Obviously the new you wanted.

Cody Michael: I remember looking out the window as we were flying back. That thing, I don't know how much ground it covers per minute or whatever, but we were up there. It was probably a six-minute flight. That set in, like, "Holy cow, how did I get that far away?" I quickly figured out that there was an operation like people are looking for me, so I remember he took a picture of me and he took a picture of my little camp that I had set up. He shows me it and he goes, "Dude, you're kind of a big deal right now. This is all over Facebook." I just looked at him. I was super confused. I go, "I don't even have a Facebook. What are you talking about?" He's like, "People want to see that you're okay. That's what this is for."

Chris Gray: What's the first thing you say to him?

Howard Michael: That's a great question. Nothing was said at first. When I first saw him, he was probably maybe 25 feet away. My wife was with me. As soon as we saw him, we made a beeline toward each other. We didn't say anything at first. We just embraced and looked into his eyes as he was walking toward me. It was quite emotional, of course. I think we had to collect ourselves and gather our breath, like what I'm doing now. I remember telling him I loved him.

Scotty Sandow: What was the first thing you said to your mom and dad?

Cody Michael: Probably, "I'm sorry." I honestly don't know. I just gave them a hug. We were all crying. I think probably just, "I'm sorry."

Chris Gray: Met Cody for the first time today. Incredible hearing his story firsthand. He seems very humbled by having been through this. What kind of change have you seen in him?

Howard Michael: That's a good way to put it. He's had many occasions where he's gone off to do things. I've actually had to cool his jets several times. I don't know that I'm going to see that side of him anymore. I think he's extremely humbled by the fact that so many people did what they did to get him back home safe. I told him, I said, "I think it's your responsibility to make sure you give all that you can back, in one form or another. You probably will not know that it saved a life by getting this information out there, but there's a good chance it will, and that's why we got to do this."

Cody Michael: Go with a group. Tell people where you're at. Tell people where you're going so if you aren't back, people know where to go look for you, because there is a huge group of people that are awesome that will spend countless hours looking for you. Get out in the open. It took me a while to do it, but get out in the open. I would recommend you try to get out for a little bit, but once you really are in a situation where you don't have a clue what to do, get out in the open and let the experts come find you. They say hug a tree.

Ty Conners: Hug a tree. If you're lost, stay where you're at. Don't go mobile. Obviously, a lot of places you hike, you don't have cell service, but there's a lot of things in the

hiking world that they have that can juice up your phone, keeping your locator on when it comes, because when you take a picture, if you have your locator on it, it will mark where that picture was taken.

There's other devices out there called Spot. It's like a little GPS thing that you have that when you go hiking and you're in an emergency you can press a button and it sends an alert off, and then they call us and say, "Hey, Spot activation in your area." That's a good thing to have too.

Wear bright colors when you go hiking. If you do get lost, that's what's going to get you found. That's the kind of flag the helicopters said he was waving around some orange thing. That's one thing we'd like people to do. That's why researchers, they wear bright orange clothing, because you can see them.

You can't put a price, you can't put anything on someone's life. Everyone's life, doesn't matter who you are, what kind of decisions you've made or anything, it's priceless. It's something that's priceless. You got to find it.

Chris Gray: No kidding. We've got so many wonderful places in Placer County to get out there and hike, just beautiful, beautiful places. It's just so important for all of us to remember how quickly a great day out on the trail can turn into a life-changing ordeal.

Scotty Sandow: Thank you to the Michael family for their support and sharing their story.

Chris Gray: Thank you to Sergeant Ty Connors with the Placer County Sheriff's Office, and Dr. Rob Oldham, Placer County's Public Health Officer.

Scotty Sandow: A very special thank you to our Placer County Sheriff's Office search and rescue volunteers.

Chris Gray: These volunteers are incredibly well-trained, but unpaid, and they rely on donations to do what they do. They hold fundraising events throughout the year, so follow Placer County Sheriff's Office on Facebook to see events near you, and please go out to show them your support. I'm Chris Gray.

Scotty Sandow: I'm Scotty Sandow.

Chris Gray: Thank you so much for joining us for this episode of The Placer Life.