

Floyd native joins exclusive ranks of SARS elite

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One of Virginia's newest search & rescue operational trackers, Floyd County native Will Dotson (center), gives SAR sign-cutters Donna Johnson, also of Floyd (left), and Teresa Crosland of Tidewater Search & Rescue pointers on identifying and recording accurate and detailed descriptions of footwear impressions so they can later be accurately identified.



by Don Johnson

Floyd County native Will Dotson has been selected an operational tracker by members of Virginia's Search and Rescue Tracking Institute (SARTI). This moves him into the ranks of one of the nation's most highly skilled wilderness search and rescue professions, one generally considered by many SAR people to rank among the best-trained, dedicated and knowledgeable searchers.

Outside magazine has estimated that there are fewer than 1,000 active man-trackers in America. SARTI, the state's only SAR group that specializes in signcutting and tracking, counts only eight among its 36 members. That now includes Dotson and two others elevated to operational status with him earlier this month.

"The greatest gift that trackers bring to a search for lost or missing people," says Mark Eggeman, search & rescue coordinator for the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM), "is the ability to recognize and possibly interpret subtle disturbances that may otherwise go unseen." According to Eggeman, "most searchers and public safety people, in general, can recognize a clear, distinctive sole impression. But a 'perfect' track is hard to come by in most missions, and it takes a special skill set to recognize the more subtle signs of disturbance, to determine if they were caused by human or animal, and to connect those signs, like a dot-to-dot puzzle, within the context of the mission. "From the search manager's

perspective, this can help drive the mission in the right direction, reducing time and effort and, ultimately, making the find quicker, which may result in saving a life," he says.

Dotson's journey through the multiple levels of search and rescue training began years ago as a child growing up in the shadow of Buffalo Mountain where his parents, Tom and Pat Dotson taught him a love of nature and the natural world. (His father, Tom, is also a member of SARTI, is a state certified Field Team Signcutter and is an accomplished outdoorsman.) "Growing up in Floyd County with its natural beauty, it becomes part of you," Dotson explains.

A 1987 graduate of Floyd County High School and a winner of the O.T. Wright General Excellence Award, Dotson also lettered in football, track and debate. He graduated from Virginia Tech in 1992 with a civil engineering degree. While there, he lettered in football. His interest in search and rescue was piqued in 1998 when he was invited to join the Carroll County Search & Rescue team. Later that year, he began his formal SAR training when he attended a basic VDEM Field Team Member (FTM) class at Hungry Mother State Park. He is now in this third 2-year term as Carroll County SAR's training officer.

Dotson's tracking experience began at 10 when he began recovering cows that strayed from the family farm near Buffalo Mountain. Also as a kid, he says, he often followed the trails of cows, dogs, house cats, buzzards, coyotes, bobcats and other wild and domestic animals. "Roaming around the mountains," he says, "I learned a lot about natural awareness and this was enhanced by a strong interest in edible and medical plants," adding that many wild plants can be hazardous and people should eat only those that they know are safe.

His interest in SAR tracking began while attending a VDEM class in the late 1990s. "I noticed those guys on their knees day and night staring at the ground and having such a good time," he says, "so I asked what they were doing." He signed up for the state's Field Team Signcutter class soon afterwards.

Over the years, Dotson has participated in all kinds of missing person searches, from lost children, to hunters, to older people who wandered off from healthcare facilities, to drownings, to people who were just overdue and didn't know they were lost.

One mission that haunts him is the still open search for five-year-old Logan Nathaniel Bowman of Galax, Va. It was one of Dotson's first searches shortly after completing field team leader training. According to The Charley Report website (<http://www.charleyproject.org>) that profiles missing persons, "Bowman was reportedly last seen at home on January 7, 2003, but his mother did not report him missing until January 23, over two weeks after his disappearance. She could not explain the reasons for the delay. He is missing under suspicious circumstances."

The child's mother, Cynthia Lee Davis, was later convicted of felony murder, the web site reports. But not all searches end without closure by a find. "One of my first searches ever was for a young lady in Grayson County who had taken off in November wearing a tee shirt and jeans," Dotson says. "We were concerned because it was pretty cold overnight."

As it turned out, she was evading searchers and was eventually found at home, in bed asleep, by her grandmother. But the search did succeed in further arousing Dotson's interest in tracking. "I noticed a guy carrying only his little tracking gear pack who was using a flashlight in the middle of the day to study a track. He told us, 'this appears to fit the criteria we're

looking for.' I found it all pretty interesting," Dotson said. "They put a bloodhound on the track and it was heading up the drainage toward the house when the grandmother found the girl in bed."

Dotson is quick to praise all SAR volunteers and professionals in Virginia and elsewhere. "We don't work in a vacuum. No one can do it all. It takes us all, and we all – professionals and volunteers alike—do it simply to save lives. We're on the same team that includes skilled people in many disciplines; dog teams, field team members, team leaders, mounted searchers, pilots, air search observers, SAR managers, and base staff people, among others." He says, "Virginia is unique in its level and dedication to the training and utilization of SAR professionals. And we really appreciate the support we receive at the federal, state, local and private level. Nothing seems to bring a community together like a search and rescue emergency."

About tracking, Dotson says, "it is unique in that it encompasses many disciplines. It's the blending of physiology, psychology, geology, botany, meteorology, and more." To reach his new tracking status, Dotson says he has logged just under 3,000 hours of formal and informal training, most of it "dirt time," as time spent studying and learning about tracks actually on the ground is called, in addition to thousands more on actual SAR tasks. Dotson's formal training includes courses taught by Joel Hardin, who has been called the tracker "elite of the elite" by an officer of the International Society of Professional Trackers (ISPT); Virginian Greg Fuller, who created the Field Team Signcutter course used by VDEM; and other recognized tracking experts.

"It's really important to get as many details as possible, as soon as possible, about a missing person's track or footwear," Dotson explains. "We look at and measure such things as individual shoe sole lugs, their spacing and their relationships. We look at a person's step length and determine how the subject's unique physical expressions may affect their print; for example, how a bum knee might cause a foot to turn out repeatedly, or how distances between heel impacts on the earth differ. And, we study individual walking habits, such as consistently walking on one side of a road and the force of how they walk," he says. According to Kevin Brewer, SARTI's director, Dotson was selected an operational tracker by his peers. "It takes many arduous hours of commitment to become an operational tracker. SARTI takes very serious the art and skill of visually tracking a lost or missing individual," he says. Among the requirements, Brewer explains, are those by the state and the unit in such skills as basic search & rescue, leadership and SAR management that must be completed before evaluation even starts for the various field levels. "Once a member shows he or she is dedicated to the tracking skill/art, which can take years in itself, he can begin the journey towards being an operational entity available at a moments notice to aid law enforcement and families in finding lost or missing people," Brewer says. He adds that a tracker's most important skill is patience. "Becoming a master of any craft requires patience, humility and dedication."

For Dotson, the most satisfying aspect of search and rescue is being able to help people. "I like to take things I've learned just by enjoying nature and applying them in a manner that can help other folks," he explains. "One really interesting thing about tracking is that you have to change your perspective from really small things in an individual track and in individual disturbances on the earth to the whole – and not just the whole of the track, but to the whole of the search." As VDEM's Eggeman says, "It takes a special kind of person to dedicate themselves to the amount of time and personal expense to actively participate. It's a long road for someone 'off-the-street' with no track training or knowledge to achieve the level of an operational search and rescue tracker. It takes a lot of dedication to get to this point."