

Boys survive 7 hours trapped beneath snow



The snowbank in which cousins Jason Rivera and Elijah Martinez built their snow fort sits at the corner of a parking lot in Newburg, New York. (AP photos)

Two boys, trapped in a snow pile for about seven hours after a plow buried them, could hear their worried family's cries. But they couldn't respond loudly enough to be heard. Police credited an air pocket with saving their lives.

The two cousins, 11-year-old Elijah Martinez and 9-year-old Jason Rivera, were building a snow fort last week across the street from Elijah's apartment in Newburgh, N.Y. That's when a plow operator who was clearing a parking lot unknowingly pushed snow over them.

Buried in about 5 feet of snow, they could barely move and couldn't breathe very well. So they could do nothing as they heard the anguished cries nearby. Jason lost his gloves. His hat flew off. They relied on each other to stay alive, they said. They shared Elijah's face mask to try and keep their hands warm and talked to each other so they wouldn't fall asleep.

"I felt so tired. It didn't feel real that they were coming to get us," Elijah said at a news conference at the hospital where the boys were recovering.

Meanwhile, their parents were growing more frantic, calling police and searching through the snowy streets for the children who were mere feet from the apartment.

"I just kept telling myself: 'This is not true. This is not real,'" said Jason's mom, Aulix Martinez. "It was just scary, and as time went on, it got scarier. I was begging the police to please find them."

Neighbor Takiaya Stevens told The Associated Press that police rallied help for the search.

"The cops were coming to all the neighbors' houses. They were knocking on doors. They were ringing bells asking for shovels, asking for help," she said. "The neighbors came out. Everyone tried to join in the search for the little boys."

Officer Brandon Rola spotted footprints that were disappearing as more snow fell. Then he saw a shovel.

"I felt led to dig," he said.

Rescuers, seeing the sole of a child's boot, dug faster as residents joined in the rescue, some with their bare hands.

"When I first hit the boot, you just try and stay positive and hopeful," Rola said. "You get that ray of hope and everybody just started working together trying to get these kids out. And as the snow kept coming come off, you started to see more and more movement and then you started to hear the voices and it was a very great feeling."

The boys were conscious but suffering from exposure.

"I felt so happy," Elijah said. "Everything we went through just fell right off my back."

"I'm just glad they got that big block off my chest, that was heavy," Jason said.

The cousins appeared healthy Friday, with Jason dressed in plaid pajamas and Elijah still wearing his snow pants and a black sweatshirt with skulls. They said they wanted to eat and go to Disney World when they got home from the hospital. Jason's mother said she wasn't sure when they would be discharged.

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