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### 37 days missing: Family, friends hold out for art teacher's return

By Zahira Torres / El Paso Times  
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EL PASO -- No one has heard from Riverside High School art teacher Gustav Erick Djerf since he vanished from the desert 37 days ago.

His bank account and credit cards have not been touched. A substitute is overseeing his art classes. Investigators say they have nothing solid that would help them locate the 47-year-old teacher.

Djerf's relatives dismiss any suggestion that he may have hurt himself, but many questions remain.

Did he leave the country? Did he simply want to escape and start a new life? Did someone hurt him?

Djerf's camping gear, food and car were found at a campsite near the Rio Grande between Fort Hancock and Sierra Blanca.

He left behind the keys to his apartment, a note telling his mom he loved her and his cell phone. He also left little notes asking that certain items be given to specific people.

His sister, Kristin Sanchez, hopes every day to hear that authorities found him and that he is safe.

But there has been no word of his whereabouts since Border Patrol agents spotted him Aug. 10 setting up camp near the river. That was the same morning he was supposed to take his mother to a doctor's appointment.

Relatives have begun moving his belongings out of his East Side apartment.

They have been told that his teaching position at Riverside High can no longer be manned by a substitute. The position was advertised by the school district.

"Life goes on," Sanchez said. "That is the problem. Time is cruel. It doesn't just allow you to wait."



Riverside High School art teacher Gustav Erick Djerf was last seen on Aug. 10 setting up camp near the Rio Grande. (Heriberto Ibarra / El Paso Times file photo)

#### Missing teacher

• Riverside High School art teacher missing

Authorities have without success scoured the desert with helicopters, dogs and on horseback.

They are not giving up.

The El Paso Police Department, Hudspeth County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Border Patrol and Texas Rangers said they continue to check all possibilities.

One of those is that Djerf may have wandered into Mexico because of the proximity of the border from where he disappeared. Authorities alerted the U.S. Consulate in Mexico and posters were distributed on both sides of the

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border.

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Authorities found footprints leading to the river near the campsite, but they said they could not confirm whether they belonged to Djerf or to someone else.

Family members and some authorities do not believe that Djerf, who is bipolar, would do anything to hurt himself. A teacher for 17 years, he did not seem unhappy and had goals and plans.

El Paso police Detective Blanca Parra said that on average it takes only a few days or weeks to find missing persons, but she hopes that Djerf will return home unharmed.

"We worry a little bit more because of the time factor, but there are people that leave and show up a year later, depending on their circumstances," Parra said.

She isn't the only person anticipating Djerf's safe return.

Students, colleagues and friends at Riverside High are worried about the dedicated teacher who pushed them to get scholarships, gave up his lunch period to be a sponsor for a Youth for Christ group and frequently stayed after school to help students finish artwork before competitions.

"It's hard," said fellow art teacher Rick Boisselier. "It is hard that he is gone and there is no word of him. Hopefully, something happens and he all of a sudden shows up."

An online gallery that Djerf started called HotBebop displays some of his artwork and photographs of chiles, flowers and jazz musicians.

On the Web site, he talked about his work and thanked his mother, Peggy Djerf, for her support, love and guidance. He said she had made religion a cornerstone in his life.

He also expresses gratitude to fellow artist and friend Stephanie Conroy, former owner of the Rose and Crown Art Gallery.

The day after Conroy read in the El Paso Times that Djerf was missing, she sent an e-mail to more than 500 people with pictures of him and asked if anyone had information. "The fact that they didn't find anything out in the desert gives that glimmer of hope," she said.

Conroy said Djerf had plans to participate in various art shows and he had even talked with the manager at his apartment complex about having an art show.

"There was a lot of stuff that he was talking about doing. That is why all of this came as such a shock," Conroy said.

Ranger Gary Shaw said that investigators continue looking for information. He said they will not stop searching for Djerf. "It is one of those things, you feel for his family," Shaw said. "There is still a lot of pain there."

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Gustav Erick Djerf

- Age: 47.
- Occupation: Riverside High School art teacher and artist.
- Hobbies: Jazz musician, who played the trombone and the drums.
- Passions: Art, religion, music, books.

Anyone with information about Djerf should call Texas Ranger Gary Shaw at 849-4080 or El Paso police Detective Blanca Parra at 599-5738.

Sequence of a disappearance

- Aug. 9: Djerf calls his mom to tell her that he would drive her to a doctor's appointment the following day.
- Aug. 10: Border Patrol agents spot Djerf setting up camp near the Rio Grande between Fort Hancock and Sierra Blanca.
- Aug. 11: A search for Djerf begins with help from the El Paso Police Department, Hudspeth County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Border Patrol and the Texas Rangers.
- Aug. 16: A story in the El Paso Times details Djerf's disappearance.
- Aug. 24: Classes start at Riverside High.
- Sept. 15: Search continues.

Anyone with information about Djerf should call Texas Ranger Gary Shaw at 849-4080 or El Paso police Detective Blanca Parra at 599-5738.

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