

State**Boy back at home after
12 days living in the wild**

BY LYNN THOMPSON
The Seattle Times

LAKE STEVENS, Wash. (AP) — He hasn't looked at a map yet to see how far into the mountains he hiked or which rivers and creeks he followed away from his home or back to civilization 12 days later.

Nicholas Clark, 13, who ran away Oct. 13 on the eve of being sent to public school, survived on peanut butter, trail mix and river water purified with iodine tablets. He gathered spruce and hemlock boughs at night to sleep on, and built small fires to dry his clothes.

His goal was to reach Tom Brown Jr.'s Tracker School in New Jersey. He'd read Brown's books on wilderness survival, nature observation and tracking. He knew the school didn't accept students under 18, but he reasoned that if he made it all the way from Washington state, Brown would take him in.

"I tried not to think about New Jersey," Nicholas said Monday at his home in Lake Stevens, two days after his adventure ended with a phone call to his mother. Wrapped in a blanket, Nicholas hunched next to a space heater in his living room, his hands blistered and stained with dirt, charcoal and bark.

On Friday, the Snohomish County sheriff's office put out a news release about Nicholas after he'd been gone for 11 days. Authorities described him as not a typical disgruntled teenage runaway, but a boy who had dreams of surviving in the wilderness. As the days stretched into a week and more, deputies feared Nicholas may have gotten lost or harmed, and they alerted the media

with a sleeping bag, tarp, matches, two packs of cookies, trail mix, tortillas, honey and four bottles of water. He didn't want the weight of a toothbrush or toothpaste. He didn't bother with soap.

He slipped out before dawn, leaving a note for his mother, Vicki Clark, that said he'd be gone for several months and would contact her when he reached his destination. It was rainy and cold, and he hadn't gone many miles before he ran into a neighborhood. He didn't know how to get through it without being seen.

"I almost gave up," he said.

He found a river — he's not sure which one — and followed it upstream, but then the river became an obstacle. There were sudden cliffs, and meanders that didn't lead east, the direction on which he set himself each day with his compass. Making progress was harder than he'd imagined. He liked nighttime because he could sit and relax.

He also had time to think. The youngest of four children, he had been home-schooled by his mom since he was little. His two older brothers had attended Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall one day a week with him for several years. But his parents had separated, his sister was on her own in Alaska and his brothers were living with his dad.

He was anxious about starting public school.

Nicholas brought a picture of his family with him into the mountains.

There were moments of great beauty. He tramped high enough into the Cascades to find bare, rocky outcroppings with a view west to Puget Sound and the Olympics. He could see sun glinting off metal and glass in a distant town. The leaves were changing.

But most days, Nicholas said he wasn't

enjoying himself as much as he'd imagined when he'd read the tracking and adventure-survival books. He missed his grandmother. He even missed a CD his mom played over and over in the car, a song by Medicine Dream, a Native Alaskan band, they'd picked up on a visit last summer to see his sister.

On the 10th night of his journey, Nicholas was gathering firewood. He said, "It just hit me that maybe I should go home. That I could be happy there and practice survival skills." That he didn't have to choose between his passion for nature and school. He decided that middle school "doesn't have to be a bad thing."

The next morning he reoriented himself southwest, where he had seen the town from the outcropping. He taped his ankles for protection against the steep descent, in which he slipped and slid and ran. He followed a hunting trail to a logging road, and that to a paved county road. After two days he stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of Granite Falls and phoned home.

His hands were so black the sheriff's deputies who came to meet him thought he might have frostbite, but it was only dirt. His mother said he looked and smelled like a hobo.

She drove her son back to Lake Stevens. He said Subway looked good. So did Alfie's Pizza. They settled on Taco Bell.

Vicki Clark said her son hasn't stopped eating since he returned.

At home in Lake Stevens, she played the Medicine Dream song. While he was away, when she didn't know where he was or if she'd see him again, she played it going to and from work, crying.

The song's first line is, "I'll take a trip into the mountains, to find the trail that takes me home."

th first day away om home
He'd stuffed backpack