

Missing man's plight 'beyond understanding'

By LIZ RUSKIN
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A pair of duck hunters from Bethel found the frozen body of Richard Pavilla last week, closing a missing-persons case that has had Bethel's search-and-rescue coordinator consulting Yup'ik elders about how to save someone stuck between two worlds.

But exactly what happened to Pavilla since he went missing Christmas Eve "is beyond my understanding," said Peter Atchak, head of the volunteer search effort.

Pavilla, 38, disappeared on a 30-mile snowmachine trip between his home village of Atmautluak and Bethel. A few days later, searchers found the body of Pavilla's companion, Richard Tikiun,

'His glasses were broken. I think he couldn't see clearly where he was going.'

— Moses Pavilla, the victim's father

next to an empty vodka bottle and the snowmachine the two were riding.

Pavilla apparently survived for some time. Searchers found size 7 Sorel tracks believed to be his and a series of shelters, some made of snow blocks and tree branches, others just pits dug into snow drifts, Alaska State Troopers said.

Troopers called off the official search Jan. 9, presuming Pavilla was dead.

But then, in villages up and down the Kuskokwim River and on the Bering Sea coast, people began reporting that they had sighted the missing man. Some said they were spooked and didn't try to approach him. Others said he ran off when they tried to get near. Pavilla's father said he saw Richard in Atmautluak, in his sister's doorway. Just last week, a Chefnak man, a respected Native healer, reported that he interviewed some village children who said they had seen him. Atchak said he quit counting after 50 reports.

As the winter wore on, the reports were that

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