

Family believes weather caused doctor, daughter to fall during hike

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CHAFFEE COUNTY - The father and daughter who went missing near Buena Vista last month died from an accidental fall, according to the Chaffee County coroner. A family member believes they may have been caught by a wind gust.

The coroner confirmed the identities of the two bodies found on Saturday morning on Missouri Mountain as Dr. Robert Michael von Gortler of Boulder and his 20-year-old daughter Makana von Gortler. She was a student at the University of Colorado.

The coroner says both died from blunt force trauma injuries to their head and neck due to a fall.

Chaffee County Sheriff Pete Palmer can't yet say where, how and why Dr. von Gortler and his daughter fell.

They were last heard from on June 22 when Makana von Gortler sent a text message to a friend saying she and her father were hiking on Missouri Mountain. Her text said they would be back the next day.

Palmer told 9NEWS the two died on June 22 and were found 10 days later.

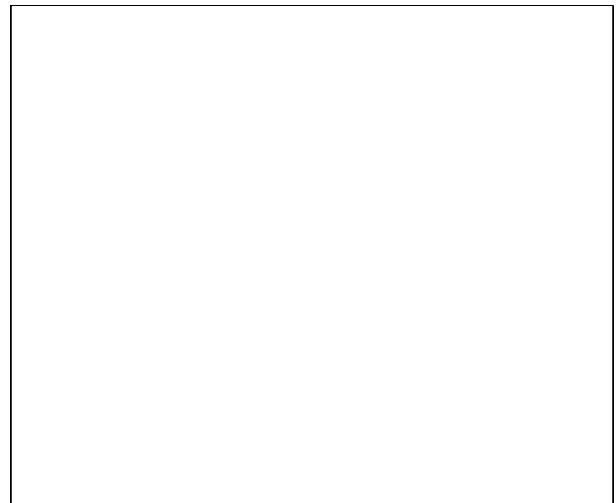
"There was a lot of snow with crust on it [on the mountain] when they were," Palmer said. "When searchers found them, conditions were different."

They were found in a "significant snow field," Palmer said.

Their bodies were found at about 12,000 feet, a mile from the summit. A helicopter spotted something on the mountain and ground crews were sent. Authorities had been looking for the two since June 28 after finding Dr. von Gortler's pickup truck at the trailhead.

A helicopter was used to retrieve the

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bodies from the steep, grassy area.

9NEWS spoke to Hans von Gortler, a younger brother of the victim who lives out of state.

"[Michael] was out in the mountains doing what he loved with his daughter who he cherished," Hans von Gortler said. "They were close to the summit and fell."

Hans von Gortler told 9NEWS the searchers told the family a gust of wind may have blown his brother and niece off the trail.

"Something must have caused them to fall, weather-related," he said.

According to Hans von Gortler, his brother was on the trail and had already reached the summit. He told 9NEWS rescuers informed the family Michael and Makana appeared to be descending and were 200 feet from the summit when they fell.

Hans says Dr. von Gortler had climbed many 14,000-foot peaks, and his ambition was to do them all.

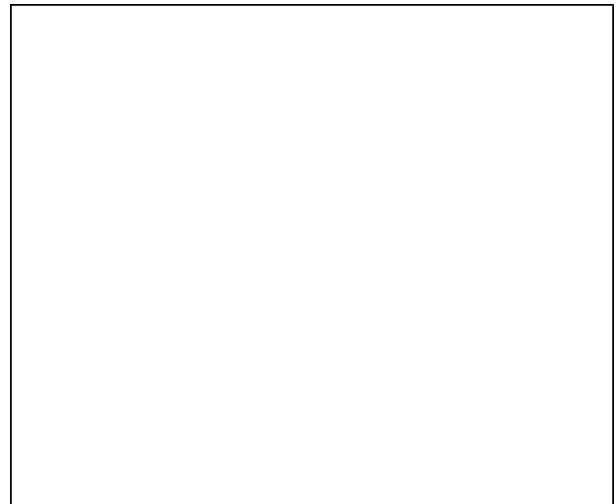
Hans von Gortler said his brother was "very much interested in saving the Earth. He established early recycling programs in California and Nevada when in college."

Family members say Dr. von Gortler was an experienced hiker who has written papers on surviving in the wilderness, but went off trail in the past. Family also said Dr. von Gortler took emergency equipment with him in case there was trouble.

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