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By Clare Weir

30 January 2006

The tearful mum of missing Holywood man Martin Kelly yesterday thanked a crowd of almost 300 people who turned up to help find her son, pledging: "Your love and hope will bring him back to us."

Karen Kelly spoke out as yellow balloons were released near Pat's Bar, where the 21-year-old was last seen just after 7pm on New Year's Day.

Each balloon carried a message from family, friends and well-wishers.

A search party then set off along the Lagan and foreshore looking for clues as to the plumber's whereabouts.

Areas including Tillysburn, Queen's Island, Holywood Exchange and Victoria Park were combed by 80 volunteers, some with sticks and dogs, while other people marched to Holywood in a show of solidarity with the family.

Martin's mum Karen told the Belfast Telegraph that she hoped the searches could reveal vital clues.

"It is a huge comfort to see so many people here and I want to thank them all," she said.

"We think he may have tried to walk home and something happened to him - that is why we are doing this.

"This is more about solidarity but I really hope that we find some clues."

Addressing the large crowd, and supported by her husband and children, she added: "Your love and hope will bring us back to him. Please stay with me and please bring Martin home."

Joe McCormick, who has known Martin since the age of four, told yesterday how he quit exams at his English university when a body was found at Dargan Road earlier this month.

Although it did not turn out to be Martin, he vowed to stay and help the search until he returns to study in a few weeks.

Joining other pals, he thanked the crowd, adding that the last few weeks had been "very difficult".

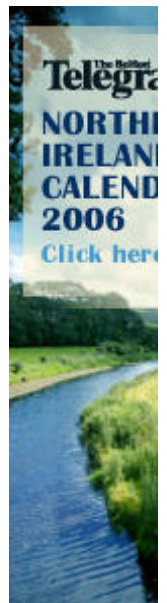
Amid criticism from the Kelly family over their efforts to find Martin, the PSNI said they had also carried out searches on Sunday.

A spokesman said that a full search of the south foreshore of Belfast Lough from Dee Street to the Holywood Exchange took place, while a police helicopter was deployed and sniffer dogs searched waste ground in the vicinity of the M3.

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