

Teen arrested in rape of 7-year-old girl

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and MARK LINSALATA

A 19-year-old resident of Willowbrook Developmental Center was arrested yesterday and charged with the April 3 rape-beating of a 7-year-old Silver Lake girl.

James Rich, a Willowbrook resident since 1969 when he was placed in the state center for the retarded by his mother, was taken into custody by detectives at 3 p.m. in the Willowbrook administration building.

After interrogation at the New Dorp police station, the suspect was officially arrested at 5 p.m. and charged with first degree rape, endangering the welfare of a child and unlawful imprisonment. Rich was held overnight in the St. George stationhouse and is expected to be arraigned today.

Officials described Rich as calm but confused yesterday. One source said that before his arrest Rich wondered what was causing all the commotion.

Willowbrook officials and other long-time observers of the state center interviewed yesterday could not recall any previous incident where a Willowbrook resident was charged with seriously harming a community resident since the center was opened after World War II.

Willowbrook officials had been informed last week that Rich was a suspect in the rape of the Silver Lake girl, who was found about 7:30 p.m. April 3 approximately 100 feet from the Silver Lake reservoir where, according to police, she had been attacked.

The girl, whose name was not released by police, was taken to Staten Island Hospital with internal and facial injuries. After surgery, she was released late last week and is recovering at home. Police would not comment yesterday if the girl identified the suspect.

At least a dozen detectives began investigating the incident early last week. According to Lt. William Juliano, who supervised the investigation, the detectives canvassed the apartment houses overlooking Silver Lake Park. Additionally, they returned to the scene for several nights and questioned joggers and people who usually walk their dogs in

the park about 7 or 7:30 p.m. Detectives also spoke with bus drivers who drive along the different routes around the park.

"We had an idea right away who the guy was," one detective commented, adding: "But we had to get it so we wouldn't lose him." Early last week, high ranking police officials said detectives had a "hot lead" on the rape suspect.

Although Inspector Vincent T. Agoglia said that Rich immediately became a suspect in the case, he would not comment on what made detectives interested in Rich. However, sources said there had been other suspects.

A high-ranking official said there was "physical evidence" linking Rich to the rape, but he would not say what the evidence was.

Juliano said that information "instrumental" to the investigation was provided by the dozens of persons who called detectives over a "hotline" set up to receive information about the attack.

"In this case," Juliano said, "people were not reluctant to help." Although a family that knows the girl offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person responsible in the attack, Juliano said that not one of the callers mentioned the reward. "They were all public spirited," he remarked.

The key figures in the investigation, according to Juliano, were Detectives Edwin Thorne and Alfred Siragusa, who were assigned the case and made the arrest yesterday.

Willowbrook's acting director, Frances Ryan, described Rich as a borderline, moderately retarded resident who has a "low boiling point," but who had never been involved in an assaultive incident off the Willowbrook campus.

Mrs. Ryan said Rich had been involved in two "assaultive type" incidents at Willowbrook in the last two weeks. She would not elaborate on the alleged incidents, nor would police comment if they were aware of the incidents.

Rich "is intelligent enough to know that if he acts out in the community he would lose his community status," Mrs. Ryan said. She said Rich "makes judgments, but not always the right ones."