

Intensive search fails to find missing woman

By THOMAS CHECCHI

The search continued today at the Staten Island Developmental Center for Ethel L. Atwell, 46, of Newark, a center employee reported missing early yesterday.

Mrs. Atwell, a mental hygiene therapist at the center for nearly 15 years, reportedly arrived for work as usual at 6 a.m. and parked her car in a small lot behind Building 47, where she works.

Meanwhile, center officials conceded that security on the 382-acre campus is lacking, and some employees condemned the lack of security provisions, especially lighting in the isolated area.

Allen Heath, an assistant supervisor, who investigated the scene shortly after Mrs. Atwell's disappearance, said: "We've been screaming about the lighting situation for months, but no one does anything about it. You wouldn't believe how dark it was out there."

The five residents of the building have been relocated to Building 33, while police use Building 47 as a temporary headquarters.

After reports from several employees of "terrible screams" coming from the parking lot shortly after 6 a.m., Heath went to investigate.

He searched the lot and surrounding area, finding Mrs. Atwell's car. Next to the car Heath reportedly spotted a purse, shoe, false teeth, an earring and several buttons.

Mrs. Atwell's son, Kenneth, later confirmed that they belonged to his mother. Heath said he drove his car to the



A state trooper with a bloodhound leads detectives through a wooded area in search of a missing Staten Island

(From Page 1)

wooded area behind the lot, but found no trace of Mrs. Atwell.

"The parking lot lights were off and it was totally dark. I saw the things next to Mrs. Atwell's car, and I noticed that her shoe had scuff marks on it. I thought something terrible happened, so I searched the woods, but I couldn't see anything," he said.

Police arrived shortly after Heath and conducted a search of the wooded area with the help of more than 100 center employees. Police helicopters also aided in the search.

Police found only Mrs. Atwell's keys in a pile of leaves about 20 feet behind the lot.

Bloodhounds were also used. After getting a scent from Mrs. Atwell's shoe, the dogs roamed the area for an hour, but nothing was found.

Members of the police Crime Scene Unit, meanwhile, took fingerprints from the woman's car and the articles found in the lot.

Police at the scene acknowledged the possibility that Mrs. Atwell could have been abducted before help arrived, although workers in the buildings close to the lot said they didn't hear a car after the screams.

"If there was something out there, I think we would have found it by now," said Sgt. Patrick McCarthy of the Crimes Against Property Squad.

McCarthy, who is heading the investigation, said Mrs. Atwell is officially listed as a missing person, but "due to the circumstances" the investigation is being conducted in conjunction with the Crimes Against Persons Squad.

William Williams, who worked with



Kenneth Atwell, son of the missing woman.

S.I. Advance Photos by Tony Carannante

Mrs. Atwell for nearly six years, said she is "a wonderful person and never had any problems with her fellow workers."

"We all hope she's all right, but it doesn't look good," Williams said. "If I was a woman, I just wouldn't work in this place. The security at night is terrible and there are many areas that aren't lighted well enough."

Kenneth Atwell, who joined in the

search for his mother, said the lighting situation "was ridiculous."

"I can't understand how they could let this happen," he said. "Anyone could get in here at night without being seen."

Elin Howe, director of the center, acknowledged that security at the center were not adequate. She said officials have tried to improve security since Shin Lee, a nurse at the center, was found dead on the center's grounds Aug. 6.

Friends of Mrs. Lee discovered her body near the Institute for Basic Research, buried in a shallow grave.

An autopsy showed that Mrs. Lee was strangled, but police have arrested no murder suspects.

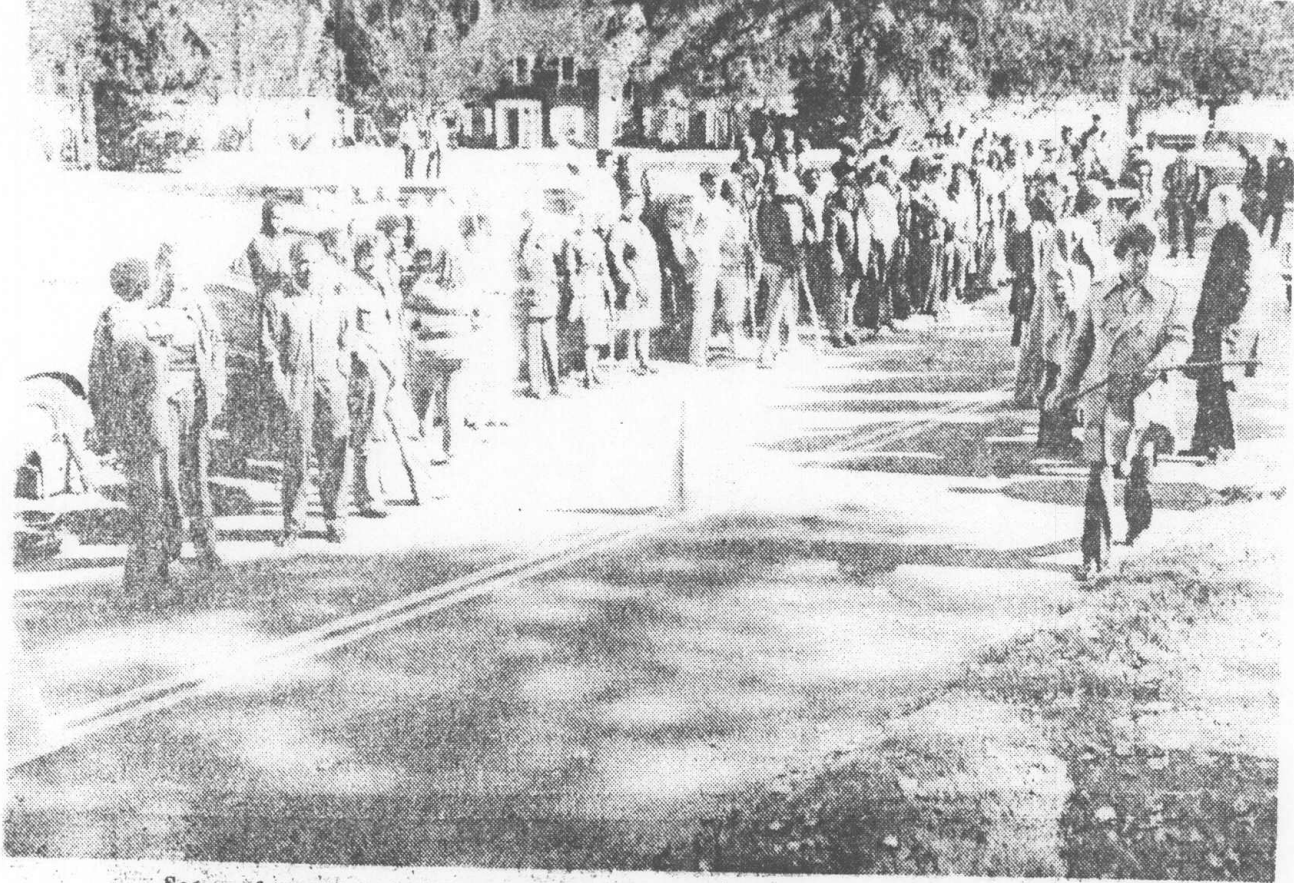
Ms. Howe said: "Since Mrs. Lee's death, we've tried to improve the security here. But it is still not as good as it should be. This is a very large campus with a lot of surrounding woods, and it's difficult to guard the entire area."

"Hopefully when things improve and we get more security guards, the situation will improve," she continued. "But for the time being, we suggest that workers do not walk the grounds alone at night."

McCarthy said the search for Mrs. Atwell would continue today. "We're going at it in every possible direction, and the search will continue until we feel satisfied that the woman isn't there or can't be found with any reasonable search."

He asked that anyone with information concerning Mrs. Atwell's disappearance call 727-6420, or the 24-hour number 979-4633. Police said all information will be kept confidential.

Page 2 of 3 Pages



Scores of center employees and residents watch as police search for Ethel Atwell.



A bloodhound picks up the scent of the missing woman from a shoe found on the ground.