

# Search continuing for missing girl, 12

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Dozens of police officers, neighbors, and family members endured the intense heat and humidity yesterday as they tried to track down a 12-year-old Westerleigh girl suffering from Down's syndrome and congenital heart disease who is believed to be traveling with a retarded man she has befriended.

A police helicopter and a hound dog were brought in yesterday to try to locate Jennifer Schweiger, who has been missing since Thursday afternoon. Neighbors canvassed stores in the community to

alert shopkeepers and glean information.

A group of teen-agers, including Jennifer's 17-year-old brother Kenneth, were hard at work through the afternoon printing up a flyer they plan to distribute to banks, store and other businesses on Staten Island.

Witnesses yesterday told detectives they had seen the girl Thursday afternoon walking with a man about 50 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall with a bald spot on the back of his head. He was described as a mentally retarded man who regularly canvasses the construction

sites and parks in the community hunting for returnable bottles.

"One person said the girl was looking up, smiling at him, as they walked along," one investigator said.

The missing girl's father, Kenneth, said Jennifer apparently met the man when she was on her way to some stores at Jewett Avenue and Victory Boulevard just about a block from her home.

"She is very trusting and lovable," the father said, strained by lack of sleep. "Maybe they were just drawn together like two happy kids and hit it off."

The girl just made her confirmation in Blessed Sacrament R.C. Church in West Brighton, and she had \$5 that had been among the gifts she received on the occasion, Schweiger said. Dressed in a pink Sesame Street T-shirt and multi-colored shorts and carrying a yellow pocketbook, the girl may have set her sights on a shopping spree, the father speculated.

According to the family, Jennifer is familiar with "her universe," which consists of about a three-block radius around her home.

Schweiger explained that his daughter would play outside a while, then go home and grab a snack, watch television or take a dip in the pool before going back out to play. Sometimes other children would be a bit cruel, or not want to play with Jennifer, so she would sit alone for a while, then return home, the father said.

"She is 7 or 8 (years old) mentally," Schweiger said. "We try to monitor her every hour or 45 minutes."

On one occasion about six years ago, the girl was missing for a couple of hours, according to authorities. It turned out she had

gone to a pizzeria at Jewett Avenue and Victory Boulevard to get something to eat, and was later returned home by police, according to Schweiger.

Police Thursday set up a temporary headquarters in front of Schweiger's home, then began searching the area. The hunt lasted until about 1 a.m., while the headquarters remained open through the night.

Detectives, plainclothes officers, a New York state trooper and about 17 uniformed officers arrived early yesterday morning to resume the hunt, according to Sgt. Jay Friedman.

The girl and her companion were spotted several times Thursday in Westerleigh, and the blood hound traced the girl's scent, mixed with that of the man, along Bradley Avenue toward the Staten Island Expressway, said Capt. John Hartman. The trail ended on Bradley Avenue between Victory Boulevard and Watchogue Road when the humidity became too much for the hound dog to bear, according to the captain.

The dog was doused with several buckets of water, then taken off to cool down. A police helicopter circled the area, searching parks and backyards in about a three-mile radius of the home.

Sweat-soaked officers went from door to door in Westerleigh, alerting residents to the search, and asking permission to search through yards and sheds. Neighbors and friends, some of whom had stayed up through the night, helped search lots and construction sites and scoured the community.

Police yesterday believed the child was somewhere within a two- to three-mile radius of her home, and that she was tagging along with her new found

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# Search



ADVANCE PHOTO/TONY CARANNANTE

State Police Officer Jerry O'Hearn gives his bloodhound Sasha a whiff of the missing girl's clothing.

"friend." According to the father, the girl would be forced to rest frequently because the intense heat and humidity would aggravate her heart condition.

"On a day like this, she and I would walk maybe a half a block and she would stop and say, 'Pain,'" Schweiger explained. "She would have to slow him down."

The temporary headquarters was shifted to a firehouse at Jewett Avenue and Markham Place yesterday afternoon, and

Hartman said police would stay in the area until the girl was found.

The open, friendly girl had her home telephone number memorized, but would not be able to tell anyone where she was calling from, the father said. Jennifer recently graduated from the special education program at PS 22, where she also took part in the Special Olympics, according to the family.

Family members and friends maintained a vigil at the home as police searched into the night.