

'Just hanging in there,' says missing girl's dad

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Systematically searching through boarded-up buildings, empty playgrounds and wooded grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center, police continued to hunt yesterday for a 12-year-old Westerleigh girl who has been missing since Thursday. The search continues today.

Police yesterday searched the Willowbrook mental institution in response to numerous reports that the girl, Jennifer Schweiger, who has Downs syndrome, was befriended by a middle-aged mentally retarded man who has been seen in the past near one of SIDC's buildings.

The girl is 4 feet 3 inches tall, weighs 65 pounds, has brown hair and hazel eyes. She was seen last on Thursday evening on Jewett Avenue, a block from her Wardwell Avenue home. At the time, she was wearing a pink Sesame Street T-shirt and pastel-colored shorts and carrying a yellow pocketbook.

The man she may have been with when she disappeared is said to be 5-foot-11, slightly built, with a bald spot on the back of his head.

"We're just hanging in there," said Kenneth Schweiger, the missing girl's father. With his eyes bloodshot and face flushed, he was subdued but seemed to be in relatively good spirits as he stood in front of his house yesterday. He said his daughter had never wandered away before.

"Basically we're just waiting for the police to contact us to tell us that it's over," he added. "We're hoping for the best."

Schweiger also expressed gratitude to supportive neighbors and friends who have kept him, his wife and 17-year-old son well-supplied with coffee and meals.

Unfortunately, the outpouring of community support was about the only good news coming out of Westerleigh last night as police turned up no clues in their hunt for the child. But "many concerned citizens — 25 to 30 — showed up to offer their help," according to a police officer manning a temporary command post set up to direct the search from a firehouse at Jewett Avenue and Markham Place.

The officer added that police and auxiliary police were looking for the girl "around the clock. We had details on all shifts." Because pre-dawn is the best time for dogs to pick up scents, bloodhounds were brought into the hunt for the second time around 4 a.m. today.

The area searched most intensively yesterday was the grounds of the SIDC, which is being phased out and appeared deserted except for nearly 20 police officers combing the silent buildings and empty playing fields. Many of the officers had their pantlegs tucked into knee-high black boots to ward

off the ticks that infest the woods and overgrown shrubs.

"We're leaving no stone unturned," said Capt. Arthur Fiordaliso, commanding officer of the 120th Precinct, as he directed a group of men lowering ropes into eight feet of water in the drainage gratings outside a vacant building at the Willowbrook institution. But the drains, like the woods and buildings, yielded no clues to the missing girl's whereabouts.

Fiordaliso emphasized that police are not ruling out the possibility that the girl wandered away on her own.

"We can't zero in on the theory that someone took her," he said. Police cars also have been cruising the Westerleigh vicinity in the hope that the child will simply turn up, lost and disoriented.

The Schweigers have lived on Wardwell Avenue for 13 years. Schweiger is an assistant manager for New York Telephone in Manhattan. He and his wife are natives of Port Richmond Center.

"We just hope anybody and everybody who might have seen her has contacted the police," said Betty Jean Fleming of Castleton Corners, who is a cousin of the missing girl's father.

Police said they had no plans to call off the search at this point. "We're hoping to find her alive and well," said one officer.

But Fiordaliso expressed concern about the fact the hunt is now in its fifth day. "It's scary," he said. "Once it gets beyond 48 hours, it's ticklish."

Anyone with information about the girl's whereabouts should phone 447-4168, which is a 24-hour confidential hotline set up especially to handle calls about the case.