

Father makes radio plea; search continues for girl

By JEAN LEVINE
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Two busloads of police officers headed for Willowbrook this morning to continue a round-the-clock search for Jennifer Schweiger, a 12-year-old Westleigh girl with Downs syndrome who has not been seen since Thursday.

Assistant Police Chief Samuel Marino said officers were starting another search of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook, including both vacant and occupied buildings at the 382-acre facility and the woods surrounding them.

Police said the child was apparently befriended by a middle-aged, mildly mentally retarded man who has been seen around one of SIDC's buildings. Employees of the facility for the developmentally disabled reportedly spotted the pair walking on the grounds sometime after 3 p.m. on Thursday — the last time the youngster was seen by anyone, officials said.

"The next thing we're going to be examining is the steam pipe tunnels and underground walkways connecting all the buildings on the site," Marino said. "We're also going to thoroughly re-check the grounds, the woods and all of the buildings."

Jennifer is 4 feet 3 inches tall, weighs 65 pounds and has brown hair and hazel eyes. Neighbors saw her shortly before 3 p.m. Thursday on Jewett Avenue, two blocks from her Wardwell Avenue home. At the time, she was wearing a pink "Sesame Street" T-shirt, rubber sandals, pastel shorts and carrying a bright yellow leather shoulder bag.

"Jen always carried that yellow pocketbook around — it was something you couldn't miss if you saw it, it was so round and loud," said 40-year-old Kenneth Schweiger, Jennifer's father.

"My wife had been vacuuming our pool sometime between 2:30 and 3 p.m. (on Thursday) and our daughter wanted to go swimming. She told her to wait until she got through cleaning it, and Jen said she was going for a walk around the corner and would be back within the hour.

"We figured she'd return by about 3:45 p.m. at the latest — she never went more than three blocks from home. If she wasn't either with me, her mother or our son, which she usually was, we could easily find her in a neighbor's yard, playing with the other kids or walking near the house."

When Jennifer failed to appear, Mrs. Schweiger searched the neighborhood and then called her husband at work. The police established a 24-hour temporary command post in a firehouse at Jewett Avenue and Markham Place, and the search began.

On leave from his job as an assistant manager of the accounting department of New York Telephone Co. in Manhattan while awaiting word of his daughter, Schweiger said he had made a plea for her safe return on WABC-AM radio at 8:45 a.m. yesterday.

Cardinal John O'Connor yesterday pleaded with whomever has Jennifer to return her to her family. "Try to realize what you're doing and get her back to her family as quickly as you can. You can't know how you're breaking hearts with what you're doing."

The man Jennifer was last seen with was described as being a slightly built 60-year-old, about 5 feet 11 inches tall and with a bald spot on the back of his head.

Schweiger said about half of the witness reports suggested the man was walking with a bike along Markham Place two blocks away and that she had been strolling along several feet behind him, while workers at SIDC placed her as walking beside the man on the grounds there.

"I'm a bit puzzled by the sightings at SIDC because Jen's never been on that property and she was only at Willowbrook Park once or twice, and that was years ago," he added.

Schweiger said he, his wife and son would like nothing more than to join police and other civilian volunteers in the search but added that doing so would interfere with a State Police bloodhound's attempt to pick up Jennifer's scent.

"She's got a 7-year-old's mental level, but she's got excellent physical health, except for a congenital heart problem," Schweiger said. "Luckily, she doesn't need medication for anything and it's been warm out, so those are two positive things. That helps keep us optimistic and our spirits up."

Sgt. Robert Scarantino of the 120th Precinct stationhouse in St. George, who is heading the investigation at the temporary headquarters in what had been the firehouse's television room, said a door-to-door canvassing of homes in a 30-block radius of Victory Boulevard, Bradley Avenue, Holden Boulevard and Forest Hill Road was conducted yesterday.

Officers Andrew Columbia and Ted Sergio, who are assigned to the 120th Precinct's Neighborhood Stabilization Unit, said they rang more than 100 doorbells apiece between 8 a.m. and noon yesterday.

"We searched the weeds of wooded lots and we talked to homeowners, but got nowhere," said Columbia. "Yet one good thing happened — we met about 25 or 30 passersby who volunteered to aid us in the search. We passed out pictures of the girl to them and they helped us canvass the area."

Those with information about the girl's whereabouts should dial a 24-hour hotline number, 447-4168, which has been set up for information regarding the case. All calls will be kept confidential.