

KENNETH SCHWEIGER stands inside one of the many deserted buildings at the Willowbrook Hospital on Staten Island. CLARENCE DAVIS DAILY NEWS

# Prayers, legwork in search for girl

By DAVID J. KRAJICEK

Daily News Police Bureau Chief

As dusk arrives, Kenneth Schweiger creeps furtively into the dense woods that surround the old Willowbrook institution on Staten Island.

Long into the night—using skills he learned in Vietnam—he stands perfectly still and utterly alone, staring into the darkness and listening intently for the sound of any movement.

He prays for any sign of his daughter, Jennifer Lyn.

The 12-year-old child, afflicted with Down's syndrome, was last seen 17 days ago when, bursting with trust and smiling, she walked into the woods clutching the hand of a vagrant.

Since then scores of volunteers and police, aided by scent-hunting dogs, hi-tech equipment and even the divinations of psychics, have vainly searched Willowbrook's largely deserted grounds and the eerie tunnels that form a labyrinth beneath the 385-acre campus.

### Beyond exhaustion

Driven beyond exhaustion by a broken heart, Schweiger has hunted obsessively for as much as 20 hours a day.

"You never know when she might come out of these woods if she gets loose or whatever," Schweiger said as he walked through the woods last week. "I get a feeling about a certain spot and I'll just stand there and just watch."

His eyes panned the dusk as he made his way through the trees, breaking off the

beaten path to peer into holes or kick at freshly turned dirt.

"Hopefully, somebody'll slip up and maybe drop something, you know," he said. "Like, I've gone through the tunnel 10 times, and on the 11th time all of a sudden I see something and say, 'Hey, that wasn't there yesterday.'"

### Eerie grounds

Schweiger is convinced the secret of his daughter's disappearance is concealed somewhere on the sprawling, often eerie grounds of Willowbrook, a largely empty institution for the mentally retarded that is haunted by the memory of residents whose gross maltreatment became a national scandal.

Schweiger and police also believe the key to what happened to Jennifer may be locked in the mind of a former Willowbrook aide—said to be mildly retarded and perhaps schizophrenic—who returned to live for years at a tidy encampment in the woods that ring the institution.

The man, said to have used

## Area of hunt gets wider

The massive search for 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger shifted from Willowbrook Park in Staten Island to a nearby residential neighborhood yesterday.

A search party composed of police and scores of civilian volunteers combed Jewett and Kemball Aves. in Castleton Corners, located about a mile northeast from the sprawling 385-acre Willowbrook complex where the youngster was last seen July 9 walking with a vagrant.

"The area is dotted with wooded areas and small parks—places where a child could be taken to," said a volunteer manning the phones at a temporary headquarters set up by police after the disappearance.

—Ruben Rosario

several aliases, including Frank Bruchette, was taken into police custody the day after Jennifer disappeared. Under escort, he was brought to his camp, bundled up his belongings and was led away.

A dozen witnesses saw a man fitting Bruchette's description walking with Jennifer in the two miles between her house and the Willowbrook grounds, ambling conspicuously with the little girl along main streets before slipping into the woods with her.

But sources said that under lengthy questioning Bruchette disavowed any knowledge of Jennifer. Police wonder: Is he telling the truth? Is he lying? Or is his mind so confused he doesn't know the difference?

### Dogs picked up scent

In the days after Jennifer vanished, specially trained dogs picked up her scent

near a Willowbrook building about 50 feet from Bruchette's campsite. But the dogs picked up no trace in the camp itself, a small area cut out of the woods with a military-style trench latrine and a bed covered by a rain-proof canopy.

Standing there last week, Schweiger gazed into a 5-foot-deep, 3-foot-wide hole dug cleanly into the earth. "That'd be about Jennifer's height, maybe a little deeper," he said.

To walk with Schweiger is to wander in a nightmare.

All but a handful of Willowbrook's 50 buildings—most of them two-story, red-brick structures with sloping roofs—are abandoned, overgrown with ivy and choked with weeds. Swing sets, slides and carousels sit rusting in play yards.

Inside the buildings, paint

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## SEARCH

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peels from the walls. But in some there are rows of beds and running water, reminders that 6,200 severely retarded children and adults once lived there in conditions that moved a nation when they were exposed on television in the early 1970s.

### Tunnels & passageways

Beneath the streets, Willowbrook's empty buildings are connected by easily accessible steam tunnels and dark passageways.

Assistant Chief Samuel Marino, heading the police search for Jennifer, refused to discuss Bruchette, reveal his true name, or even confirm officially that he is the same man who disappeared into the woods with her.

Marino acknowledged only that a vagrant had been questioned, but not detained. He said the man is not in custody, but that police know where he is.

But sources involved in the investigation said a picture of the man taken into custody and distributed to detectives was identified by long-time Willowbrook employes as that of Bruchette.

Other sources said Bruchette has used various aliases, apparently served in the Navy and may have split time between an undisclosed location in New Jersey and his Willowbrook camp. Willowbrook records show Bruchette worked there for two

years in the 1960s as an aide.

Jennifer was born with Down's syndrome, a congenital condition usually caused by the presence of an extra chromosome and characterized by mental and physical retardation, mongoloid features and shortened life expectancy.

She has the mental capacity of a 7- or 8-year-old and attends special education classes at Public School 22 near her home on Wardwell Ave. in the Westerleigh section of the island.

Schweiger, 40, an accountant with New York Telephone in midtown Manhattan, said he and his wife, Karen, sought to foster a sense of independence in Jennifer while instilling in her a wariness of those who would prey on the innocent.

"She knows where she lives," Schweiger said. "She could say her name. She knows her address, 291 Wardwell—she says Wadwell. She knows her home phone number. She memorized that because we kept drilling that into to her in case she happened to wander sometime. And we taught her to use a publicphone."

### A neighborhood favorite

Jennifer was a neighborhood favorite, scooting along the sidewalks on her bicycle with training wheels, her pig-tails flapping in the breeze. She would stop to play with other girls and would while away the warm hours in a small backyard pool.

Schweiger and his 39-year-old wife put their house on the market April 1 and had been preparing to move to a larger place in Lakewood, N.J.

But their life was suspended July 9 when Jennifer disappeared. She went off wearing a pink Sesame Street T-shirt and striped shorts. She was carrying a yellow pocketbook with about \$9 inside—telephone change, several singles and a crisp \$5 bill she'd received in a Confirmation card from her great-aunt.

All Willowbrook employes and residents, about 100 of each, have been interviewed.

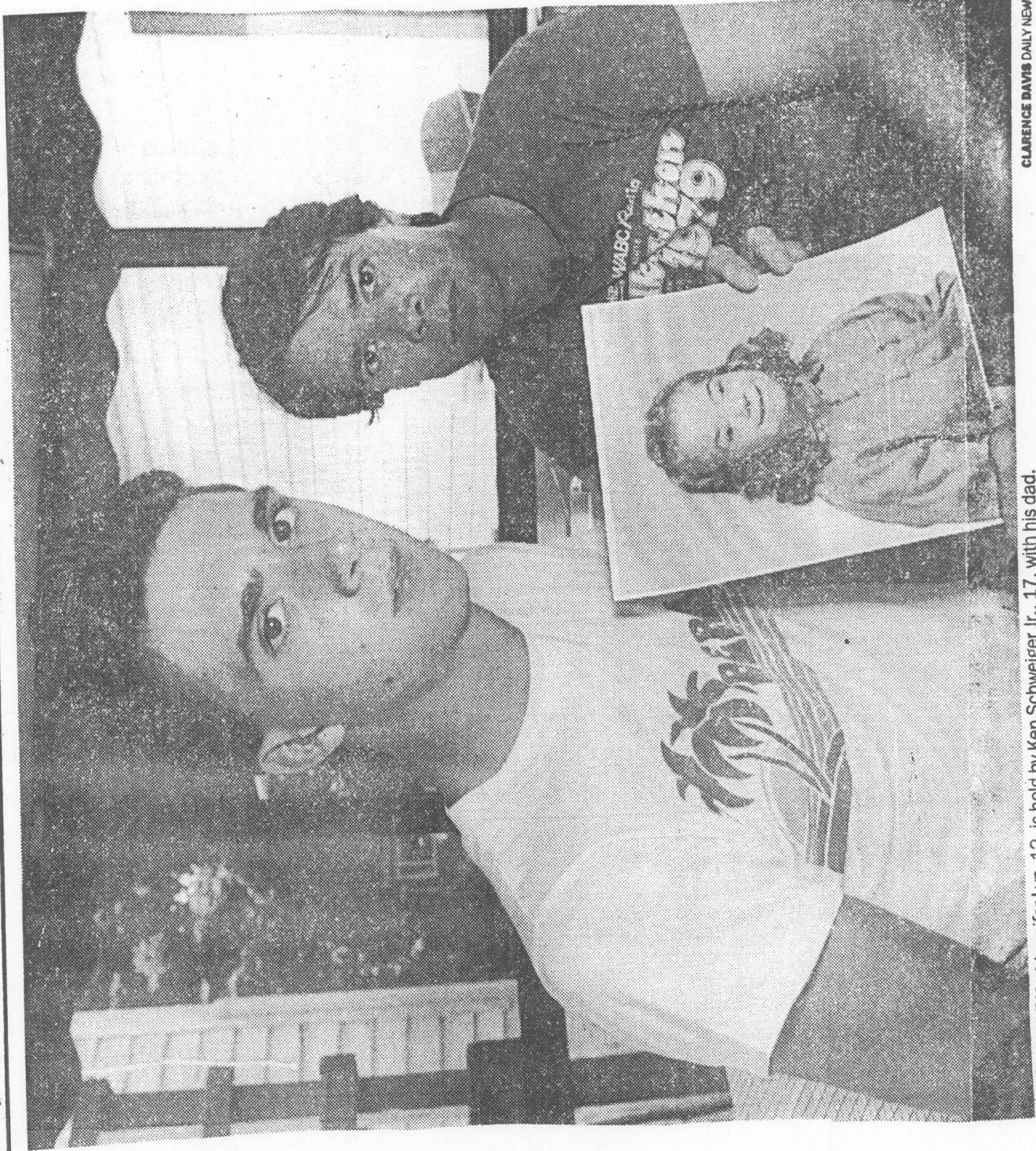
"I really can't think of a damn thing we haven't done except solve the case," said Assistant Chief Marino. "It's a cliché, but we're not leaving any stone unturned."

Schweiger said he is satisfied with the police effort so far but he is concerned the search, which included hundreds of neighbors, will lose momentum with each passing day.

But for Schweiger there is no giving up his personal hunt. Last week, on one of his daily rounds, he stooped to pick up a scrap of yellow plastic—the purse, he thought for a moment.

"There must have been something he said to her to really coax her," he said, fingering the plastic. "What amazes me is that here's a filthy old guy with a little girl walking along and nobody challenged him. Nobody."

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PHOTOGRAPH of Jennifer Lyn, 12, is held by Ken Schweiger Jr., 17, with his dad.

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## Willowbrook a sad affair

The disappearance of Jennifer Schweiger on the grounds of Willowbrook is the latest incident in the tragic and horrifying history surrounding the institution.

Built in the 1940s on wooded land at the heart of Staten Island, it was originally named the Willowbrook School for Mental Defectives. Its 50-plus buildings are scattered over 385 acres ringed by thick woods.

Later known as the Willowbrook Developmental Center, it housed up to 6,200 people and became a national symbol of mistreatment of mental patients in the early 1970s when television viewers sat in their livingrooms and wept over news film of naked children sprawled on bathroom floors, covered with filth. The institution is now little more than a ghost town, with weeds encircling most of the abandoned buildings.

The last of the 100 patients at the facility—now known as the Staten Island Developmental Center—will be moved this fall out of the brick buildings and into renovated cottages at the southeastern corner of the property.

—David J. Krajicek

# Pattern sought in cases

## 5 are missing: Is there a link?

A vagrant questioned by police about the disappearance of Jennifer Schweiger also was interrogated about the highly publicized disappearance of Holly Ann Hughes in Staten Island six years ago.

Police officials acknowledged the link but said he had not been declared a suspect in either case. At the same time, cops are reviewing files on other missing-person and murder cases to check for possible ties.

Sources have identified the vagrant as a man who used the name Frank Bruchette when he worked at Willowbrook from early 1966 until late 1968. Until two weeks ago, the vagrant lived at a campsite in the Willowbrook woods.

Police have refused to give the man's real name but say he was questioned about the Hughes case because he was in the area where she was last seen. The 7-year-old Holly Ann vanished in Port Richmond on July 15, 1981. She was last seen at a deli on Richmond Terrace, about 4 miles north of the Schweiger home.

### Matches description

Hughes' grandfather, Sven Cederholm, said a man using the name Andre Rand and matching the description of Bruchette—bad teeth, balding, gray hair, average build and prematurely aged—was questioned extensively about Holly Ann's disappearance.

Among the other Staten Island cases that have been reviewed by police:

• Tiahease Jackson, 10, disappeared Aug. 13, 1983, in Mariner's Harbor. She was last seen after she left her welfare hotel to buy chicken wings at a store at Forest and Richmond Aves., two miles north of Willowbrook.

• Alice Pereira, 5, disappeared on July 10, 1972, near her apartment on Tysens Lane in the New Dorp section, several miles southeast of Willowbrook.

• Ethel Attwell, 46, a physical therapy aide at Willowbrook, was dragged from a parking lot there as she was about to get in her car on Oct. 25, 1978. She was never seen again.

• Shin Lee, a nurse's aide at Willowbrook and a mother of three, disappeared while at work there on July 20, 1978. Her body, clad only in underwear, was found two weeks later in a shallow grave in the Willowbrook woods. She had been raped and strangled.

—David J. Krajicek