

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