

Emotional rally spurs searchers of missing girl

By GLENN CHAPMAN
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Hundreds of brightly colored balloons, each carrying a poster of Jennifer Schweiger, were released into the sky above Westerleigh as a huge team of volunteers set out to hunt down some trace of the missing girl.

A cheer rose from the crowd when the Rev. Henry Gentile, tears welling up in his eyes, pointed to the entrance of Holy Family R.C. Church and said "We want to see her on that doorstep again with a smile. We want to embrace her again."

Youths on bicycles, mothers with young children, grandparents, and single adults were among the more than 350 people who showed up at the church in the hope of finding some trace of Jennifer.

"I'm extremely proud of the family of Staten Island," said Borough President Ralph Lamberti as he prepared to launch one of the balloons. "There are people of all generations in that parking lot. When one member of the family is in need, the family responds."

Jennifer has been the subject of an intensive search since vanishing from the street near her Wardwell Avenue home July 9. She has Down's syndrome and

congenital heart disease.

The girl's parents reviewed maps and search patterns with Assistant Chief Samuel C. Marino, commander of Staten Island's police force, while the volunteers were divided into teams.

Ken Schweiger, Jennifer's father, along with Donna Cutugno of the Friends of Jennifer, assigned the teams to areas along Victory Boulevard and Travis Avenue in Travis. Searchers, pulling on gloves and passing around mosquito repellent, gathered at their drop-off points and worked their way into the woodlands bordering the roadways.

"Every night we've been going out to look," said Jodie Lord of Midland Beach, who with her mother and two children readied to resume the hunt. "We just hope we find something."

Members of the National Guard and a busload of volunteers from Monmouth, N.J., were among the people wading through the dense underbrush looking for sign of the girl or her clothing. Jennifer was wearing a pink Sesame Street T-shirt and multi-colored striped shorts, and carrying a bright yellow pocketbook when she disappeared.

"Our purpose today is two-fold," said Ron Glab, who with his 24-year-old son, Mike, and about 15 others had come to the Island from Monmouth for the day. "The

first is to find (Jennifer). The second is to send a message to anyone that when something like this happens to a child, we are not going to just let it go unsolved."

Volunteers combed the lots and fields from the William T. Davis Wildlife Refuge to the Con Edison plant at the foot of Victory Boulevard. A police helicopter circled the area to keep track of the progress and aid in the hunt.

A Red Cross van stationed at Victory Boulevard and Travis Avenue provided searchers with refreshments. Some residents in the area even helped out by offering volunteers a light snack or use of a bathroom.

Teams of officers trained to search rugged terrain continued to scour the perimeter of the Fresh Kills Landfill yesterday. The officers started at their field headquarters at Richmond Avenue and Richmond Hill Road a day earlier, and expected to have reached the Fresh Kills Bridge late last night.

During the day boats and inflatable rafts were used by members of the Police Harbor Patrol to search the Richmond and Fresh

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