

Emotional rally spurs searchers of missing girl

By GLENN CHAPMAN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Hundreds of brightly colored balloons, each carrying a poster of Jennifer Schweiger, were released into the sky above Westleigh 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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Kills creeks and the deep waters in adjoining parts of the marshland.

According to Marino, the search will continue today along the Staten Island Expressway into Travis, and then be focused on the Greenbelt tomorrow.

"Everyone has been working with a fervor you wouldn't believe could exist," said Father Gentile, an associate pastor at Holy Family Church.

According to the priest, thousands more posters have been distributed in areas throughout the city, and volunteers are trying to reach out to people in Manhattan to determine if the girl may have been taken there.

"We are trying to hold up," Jennifer's mother, Karen, said as the massive hunt got underway. "It's getting harder as time goes by, but, we still have hope."

Bishop Patrick E. Ahern, Staten Island's Episcopal vicar, has visited with the Schweiger family over the past weeks and yesterday described the child's disappearance as an "unspeakable tragedy" which has left people devastated.

"We can't let ourselves give in



Ken Schweiger, Jennifer's father, goes over the areas where volunteers will search.

to frustration and disappointment," Lamberti told the crowd of searchers yesterday. "The volunteers are the ones who are making

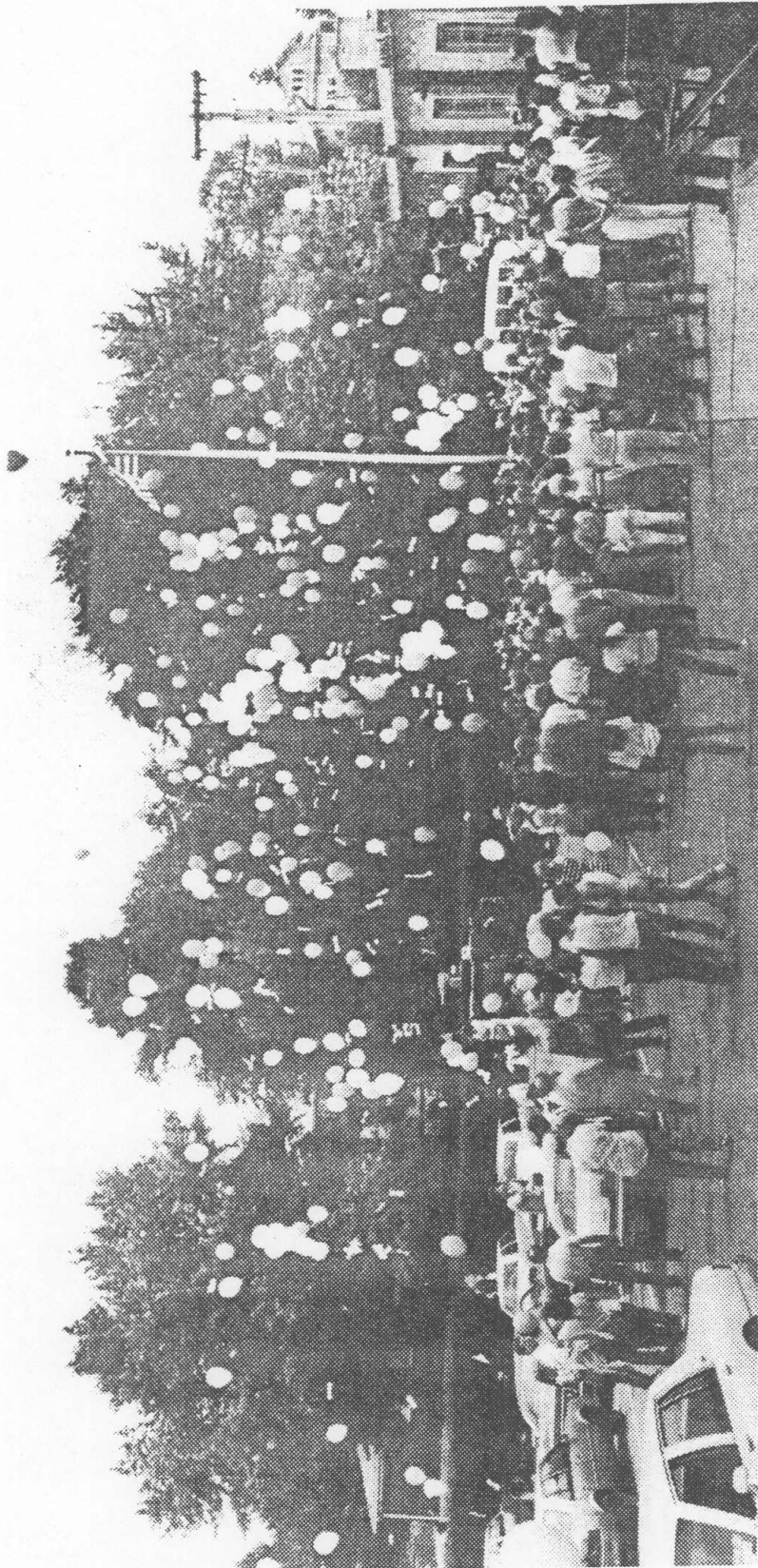
this work."

Detectives handling the investigation continue to search for new leads in the case, and said yesterday there is still no evidence to prove Jennifer had fallen victim to foul play.

The Friends of Jennifer group is operating out of Holy Family Church, and anyone interested in volunteering to help with the hunt for the child is asked to call the group at 494-5460.

Anyone with information concerning Jennifer's disappearance or the possible whereabouts of the girl is asked to call police at a 24-hour hotline number, 447-4168.

Donations are still being collected to increase a \$5,000 reward being offered for Jennifer's safe return and the conviction of anyone who may have been responsible for her disappearance. Anyone interested in contributing can send donations to The Jennifer Schweiger Fund, P.O. Box 961, Staten Island, N.Y. 10314.



ADVANCE PHOTOS/TONY CARANNANTE

A crowd of volunteers gathered at Holy Family R.C. Church before resuming the search for Jennifer Schweiger.