

LAURA MILLER

Missing child, grieving family

I DON'T HAVE kids. But I don't think it takes a lot of imagination to know how painful it must be to lose one: To have your child sitting in the kitchen, giggling over a plate of chicken one minute and vanishing in the next. To have your child run out the door to play but never run back. To know that she disappeared into the daily hum of another summer afternoon while kids splashed in their backyard pools and people drove by on the way to the store and life was normal in every single respect except one. Your daughter was nowhere to be found.

It has been 27 days since Jennifer Schweiger disappeared.

It has been 27 days since her parents, Karen and Ken Schweiger, and her brother have had a normal day.

"Our world has stopped," says Mrs. Schweiger, sitting on the carpeted floor of her living room on Wardwell Ave. on Staten Island. "Even reading a newspaper. The only articles I read are the ones on Jennifer because I have no desire to read the rest of the paper. I don't know what else is going on in the world."

Her husband nods appreciably, holding a freshly lit cigaret between his fingers. "To us, all that's going on out there is a massive search for our daughter," he says. "The rest of the world is at a standstill as far as we're concerned."

Their lives are at a standstill, too. Schweiger, an accountant with the New York Telephone Co., has not worked since his daughter disappeared. His wife has done no housework, no cooking, no shopping: "I haven't even made the beds." Ken Jr. quit his summer job pumping gas.

They don't swim in their pool, which Jennifer loved to splash in. They don't watch television, not even to see the news stories on their daughter. They do not think—not for a minute—that maybe she is not coming home.

LIKE THE POLICE SAY to us, there's no sign of foul play that's been found," says Mrs. Schweiger. "And no news is good news. We think she's still alive and being taken care of."

But the clues are few. Neighbors saw her on July 9, just 30 minutes after she finished lunch and went out to play. She was walking down a street six blocks from her home, clutching the hand of a man about 60, 5-foot-8, balding, with bad teeth, dressed shabbily in a blue shirt and gray pants.



Jennifer, a 12-year-old with Down's syndrome, wore a pink T-shirt with a Sesame Street logo and a pair of nylon striped shorts. She carried a bright yellow pocketbook. She gazed trustfully at her companion.

An employe of the old Willowbrook mental institution, a sprawling, mostly abandoned 385-acre facility two miles from the Schweigers' home, sighted Jennifer and the man walking the grounds that afternoon.

A bloodhound and a Dalmatian, using Jennifer's bed pillow as a compass, picked up her smell on the Willowbrook property and in one of its abandoned dormitories, littered with mattresses and paper plates.

Hundreds of volunteers have searched for her. Relatives have dug up what they feared were shallow graves. The police buzz the area in helicopters.

Every Saturday, search parties gather at a local church. They have distributed 6,000 missing-person posters, taping them all over Staten Island—from the ferry docks downtown to the deli windows on Bay St. to the backs of bus shelters at Silver Lake Park.

But the days pass. And there is no word.

The hardest time of the day for Jennifer's father is the evening, when the sun goes down, fading his hopes, and he knows that despite all his efforts he is empty-handed. For his wife, the mornings are most trying because she wakes up nervous and thinks, "This could be the day."

But when it is not, Mrs. Schweiger takes comfort in her daughter's room—a perfectly beautiful little girl's bedroom with matching white furniture and a baby-blue carpet and blue-and-white gingham fabric on the windows and lampshades. On the shelves are toys and stuffed animals and dolls and brightly colored felt pens and coloring books. There are trophies Jennifer won for ballet dancing and bowling. There is a white Fisher-Price record player that, until this month, played Christmas songs every Saturday morning, no matter what the season.

THIS IS WHERE Karen Schweiger seeks refuge. She gathers her strength, sheds her tears, stares lovingly and longingly at her child's playthings.

And even for a person with no children, it isn't hard to imagine how very painful it must be.