

Drifter, 43, is accused of kidnapping Jennifer

Youngster is still missing



Jennifer Schweiger

By GLENN CHAPMAN
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A 43-year-old homeless man with a history of crimes against children was arrested last night and charged with kidnapping and unlawfully imprisoning Jennifer Schweiger.

Andre Rand, his head down and a glazed look on his face, was handcuffed when Detectives Robert Jensen and Ralph Aquino from the Crimes Against Property Squad brought him into the 120th Precinct stationhouse in St. George shortly after 11 o'clock.

Police said Rand was seen walking with the 12-year-old girl the day she disappeared from the street near her Wardwell Avenue home in Westerleigh. According to investigators, Rand and the girl were last seen together at the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), where the girl's trail ended.

One witness told police the girl was holding Rand's hand and smiling up at him as they walked along, according to authorities. Jennifer has Down's syndrome and congenital heart disease. According to the girl's father, Kenneth Schweiger, Jennifer was extremely warm and trusting.

Volunteers and police using equipment have searched SIDC for some trace of the girl over the past 27 days.

Rand had been living in a makeshift campsite hidden in the woods across from building 27 on the SIDC grounds for a few years, but last night he gave police an address of 320 St. Marks Place, St. George.

The address is that of the Brigh-

ton Heights Reform Church, which houses Project Hospitality, a program designed to help homeless people by providing meals, counseling and shelter during the winter months.

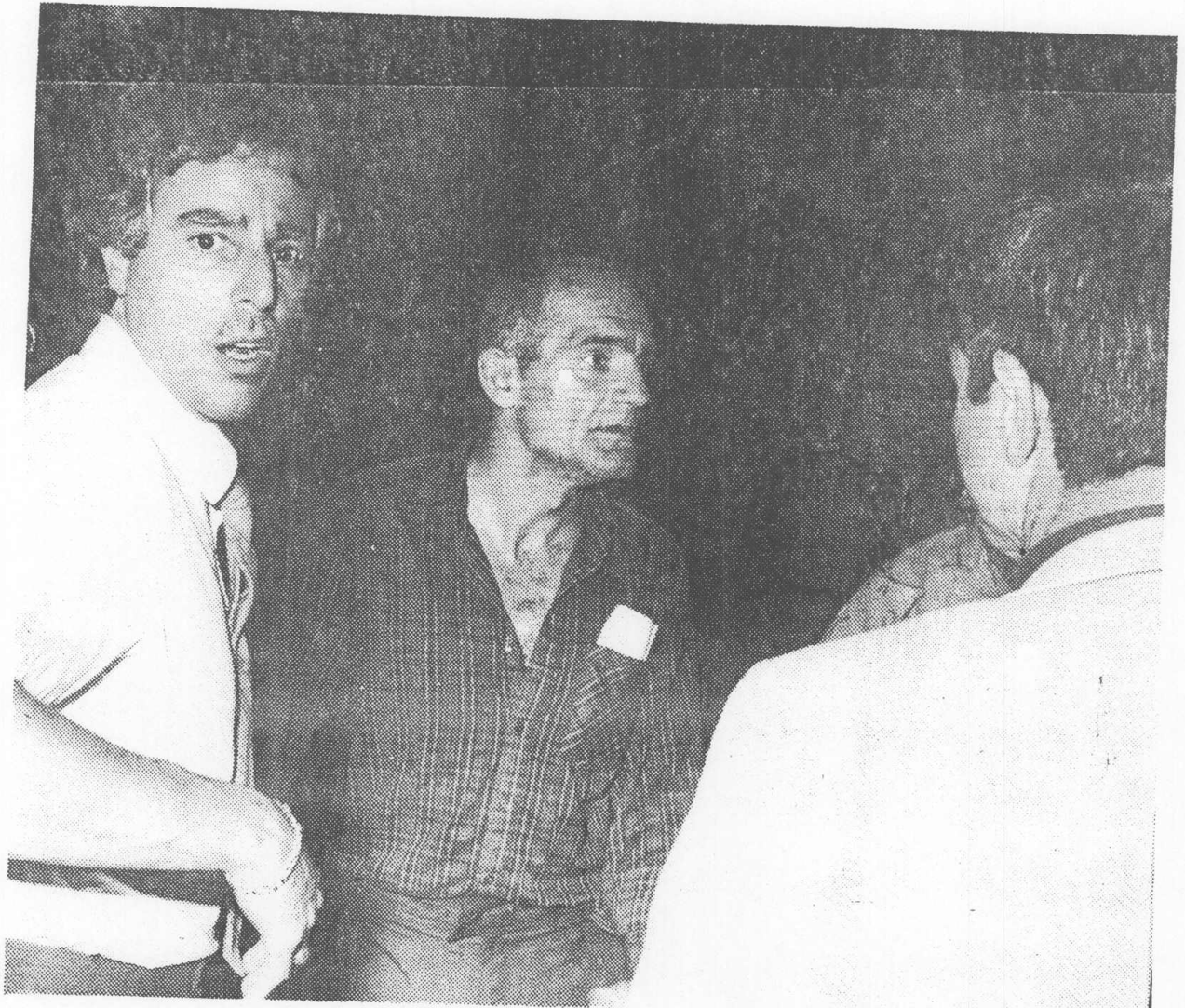
Rand had been interviewed for several hours over a two-day period by detectives who "tried to break him" early in the investigation, but he was not arrested at the time. According to First Deputy Police Commissioner Richard Condon, detectives working on the case have been continually consulting with Staten Island District Attorney William Murphy, who gave the go ahead for last night's arrest.

Condon this morning refused to discuss what prompted the arrest and would not say whether new evidence had surfaced in the case.

"They arrested him based on whatever evidence they had linking him to the child," said Sgt. Raymond O'Donnell, a Police Department spokesman.

Detectives have been interviewing witnesses and following up leads in the case for almost a month. Plainclothes detectives from Manhattan have been prowling the North Shore every night

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Detective Vito Peragine, left, escorts Andre Rand.

ADVANCE PHOTO/TONY CARANNANTE

Jennifer

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for weeks working on the case.

According to police, no assault or murder charges have been filed against Rand because, as of yet, no evidence has been uncovered to show the girl has been the victim of violence.

Investigators earlier in the search revealed that Rand had somehow been placed in the "area" prior to the disappearances of several other Island children over the past 15 years.

He was targeted as a suspect and taken in for questioning by detectives investigating the disappearance of 7-year-old Holly Ann Hughes of Port Richmond in July 1981, police conceded. According to authorities, detectives are also investigating a possible link between Rand and the disappearance of 10-year-old Tiahease Jackson in August 1983.

Condon refused to comment on any possible investigation into a connection between Rand and other missing Island children. When asked of possible criminal charges being filed against Rand in connection with the other disappearances, O'Donnell would only say "not at this time."

Rand, who police said legally changed his last name from "Rashan" in the 1970s, was convicted four years ago of loading 11 West Brighton children into a van and taking them to New Jersey without letting their parents know what was happening.

The children were taken to the Elizabeth-Newark area, where they ate dinner at a White Castle restaurant and watched airplanes take off and land at Newark Airport on Jan. 9, 1983, according to Advance records.

The escapade lasted five hours, and Rand was arrested on charges of unlawful imprisonment when he returned to the Island with the children, police reported. None of the children was reported injured.

Rand, who was living on Cary Avenue in West Brighton at that time, was convicted of the charge in March of that year and sentenced to 10 months in prison, according to Advance records.

The assistant district attorney prosecuting the case at that time said that Rand had been convicted in the Bronx several years earlier on charges he had sexually abused a minor.

Rand reportedly has been living on the Island since he was discharged from the military in 1965. No further information on his background was available this morning.

Rand was charged last night with second-degree kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment in the case of Jennifer Schweiger, Condon said.

The deputy commissioner added that Rand was unemployed and not married. Westerleigh residents and police interviewed during the course of the search for the girl said Rand was known to ride around on a bicycle on an almost daily basis, canvassing the area for returnable bottles.

Police said Rand may have gone by another name, Bouchette, at one time.

Rand had been described by investigators as being emotionally disturbed, but Condon would not comment on the point during a press conference in the 120th Precinct stationhouse early this morning. Condon was flanked by the district attorney and Assistant Chief Samuel C. Marino, chief of the Island's police force.

According to police, no sign of the girl or her fate has yet been found, but the search for clues is continuing.

Yesterday, a team of rugged-terrain officers scoured the Greenbelt, a contingent of off-duty Corrections Officers combed the nearby Farm Colony in Sea View, and a mixed band of volunteers worked their way through wooded areas in Travis.

By the close of day, searchers were fatigued but not discouraged at having turned up no trace of the girl.

"The search never ends, the temporary headquarters never closes," O'Donnell said. "It continues on until we find something."

Police and volunteers crawled through dense brush in wooded lots, parks, and abandoned cemeteries.

"(Detectives) are still at it," said Lt. Louis Fiori, commander of the Property Squad. "We are going over a lot of information."

Investigators are also reviewing the log of reported sightings being kept at the police search headquarters to insure that no potential leads have been overlooked, according to the lieutenant.

Anyone with information concerning Jennifer's disappearance is asked to call the police 24-hour search hotline, 447-4168.

People interested in joining the search for clues can meet with other volunteers at Holy Family R.C. Church on Watchogue Road in Westerleigh daily at noon and 7 p.m. Anyone interested in finding out how else they can help in the search can contact a group called The Friends of Jennifer at 494-5460.