

The pledge: Search until she's found

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The tragic disappearance of Jennifer Schweiger has brought out a fierce determination in hundreds of Staten Island residents.

"People who are afraid to go into their basements are going into tick-filled woods," said Charles Cutugno, whose wife, Donna, leads the volunteer search effort of the Friends of Jennifer.

A core group of about 50 searchers shows up at the Holy Family R.C. Church in Westerleigh daily to continue hunting for the 12-year-old girl who has been missing for more than a month. Groups of off-duty corrections officers, police, union members, youth associations and other groups augment the steady team.

In almost every case, the people turning out spoke of a daughter, sister, niece, or grandchild who may easily have suffered Jennifer's fate, and how the Schweiger family deserved all the help in the world.

John VanOrden of Great Kills shows up almost every night, totting supplies and handing out flashlights donated to the effort by Con Edison. VanOrden lost a stepdaughter for 11 years after her natural father reportedly abducted her, and didn't see the girl again until she was 17 years old.

Police Sgt. Ronald Jacobs of the Emergency Services Unit was originally assigned to the search as part of his job, but soon joined his wife and daughter in working with the volunteers on his own time.

"I can't let this guy beat me," Jacobs said firmly, referring to Andre Rand who has been charged with kidnapping the missing 12-year-old girl. "He's driving me crazy now."

In looking for Jennifer yesterday afternoon, Jacobs found the badly decomposed body of an elderly woman in a swampy area of the Mariners Harbor shoreline.

There was no immediate identification of the body but police believe it is that of Julia Kapolka, a 73-year-old resident of the Sts. Cosmas and Damian Adult Home who has been missing since July 23.

Family-like bonds have developed among those searching for Jennifer, as they face rats, snakes, ticks, mosquitos and poison sumac. Volunteers venture into dense woods, deserted graveyards and darkened basements of abandoned buildings.

"The stench of urine in the basements (at Staten Island Developmental Center) was awful," said Peter DiMiceli, 13, who, with his partner, 16-year-old John Labita, has ventured through many of the buildings. "Also the snakes, rats and lots of cockroaches."

"You get used to it," longtime searcher Tom Fougner said flatly.

Veteran searchers can be recognized by the way their pants are tucked tightly inside their socks to keep the ticks out. Someone is always around with tape to wrap around your pant legs just to make sure the bugs stay out. Candy bars and extra packs of cigarettes are tucked into buttoned pockets. Walking sticks are standard probing equipment.

The smell of insect repellent is always in the air. "We all wear the same cologne," joked Marlene Provenzano of Westerleigh as she geared up in the parking lot of SIDC Saturday. "I've been wearing it for weeks."

Vietnam veterans who had joined in Saturday's search returned yesterday to team up with about 150 people who resumed the hunt for Jennifer Schweiger, a 12-year-old Westerleigh girl who has been missing since July 9. The shoreline bordering Richmond Terrace in Mariners Harbor was targeted, along with sections of the Greenbelt near Susan Wagner High School and the dense woods behind Baron Hirsch Cemetery.

Members of Richmond County R.E.A.C.T. and Child Find took to the brush and thickets bordering the Fresh Kills landfill, and in lots in Stapleton, said R.E.A.C.T. President Bob Cacciola.

A special team of Emergency Services Officers from throughout the city continued scouring sections of the Greenbelt and Pouch Scout Camp yesterday.

Sharing bug spray, canteens, encouragement and advice, all of the volunteers remain focused on a single goal — finding Jennifer.

"It's like an obsession," said Marge Martin, who along with her husband, Joseph, has devoted hours daily to the effort. "I can't sleep, I can't eat. Finding Jennifer is always on my mind."

Veteran searchers Richard Burdge and Robert Devine have dug in the sand of South Beach under the full moon because of a woman's "vision," crawled through weeds in graveyards, and climbed into abandoned buildings when there was even the slightest hint it could lead them to Jennifer.

"I'm going to look until I find her," said Burdge, a Meiers Corners resident. "If they tell me to go to Timbuktu, I'll go there."

According to Fougner and Mrs. Martin, groups of volunteers have continued on through thunderstorms, heat waves and insect attacks with barely a murmur of complaint.

"I went through a brook last night (Thursday). I was wet up to my knees," said Shirley Grille, an Elm Park woman who joined the search shortly after Jennifer disappeared. "I keep going. It's just something you do. Just the thought that it might be my child, and the feelings of the mother and father."