

# Willowbrook woman 'dynamo' behind search

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ADVANCE PHOTO/IRVING SILVERSTEIN

Young Kenneth Tilton helps John VanOrden stockpile cans of cold soda as the search team prepares to leave from the parking lot of Holy Family R.C. Church in Westerleigh.

By **GLENN CHAPMAN**  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Cardinal John O'Connor describes her as a dynamo.

Hundreds of Staten Island residents pouring their spirits into the search for a missing 12-year-old girl look upon her as their leader.

She is the daughter of a city police detective who was killed in the line of duty when she was 9 years old.

Her children just call her "mom."

Donna Cutugno's days, as well as those of her husband, Charles, have become a seemingly endless collage of searches, clues from psychics, pleas and plans as she coordinates volunteer efforts to find Jennifer Schweiger.

Jennifer vanished from the street near her Wardwell Avenue home July 9 and, as official efforts to find the child came up empty, people from across the Island sought new ways to help.

It was a compassionate but disorganized volunteer effort until Donna stepped in.

Within days, Donna had established a group called the Friends of Jennifer, a band of volunteers determined to find the missing girl.

"She's just a ball of energy," Cardinal O'Connor said, glancing toward Donna as she dispatched groups of volunteers from a meeting hall in Holy Family R.C. Church on Saturday. "I don't know if she's getting any sleep, or if she eats."

Donna's days now begin at 6 a.m., when she and her husband try to organize the household for the day, and tend to their still sleepy 4-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter.

By 8 a.m. Donna's on the telephone, waking volunteers, consulting with detectives about areas to search and trying to keep the Schweigers' plight in the public eye.

Special assignments have to be developed for groups like corrections officers, Army veterans and youth organizations that call to offer help. And the nuts and bolts — minor, but important details — have to be tended to: Who has the soda? Is there enough ice to refresh the searchers? Have the additional Jennifer posters been



ADVANCE PHOTO/IRVING SILVERSTEIN

**Donna Cutugno, co-ordinator of the Friends of Jennifer, prepares a list of areas to be searched.**

printed up? Is there a doctor or nurse going to be available to take care of injuries? Has anyone unlocked the church hall so people can use the bathroom?

At noon, concerned people from the Island and other parts of the metropolitan area are divided into groups, told what to be on the lookout for, then dispatched from the staging area in the parking lot of Holy Family Church.

Through the afternoon, Donna and a small team of regulars in the search gather the information and leads brought in by volunteers.

Hopes soar as searchers come sprinting back with news of discovered clothing, notes, campsites and signs of freshly dug earth. The hopes crash-land just as quickly when authorities determine they are just more dead ends.

"I must have six yellow bags. My car is filled with stuff," Donna noted. Jennifer was carrying a bright yellow pocketbook the day she disappeared.

Yesterday, there was a grim discovery: A dead body. But police believe it is that of an elderly woman, not Jennifer.

After reviewing the new information and following up on everything from eyewitness accounts to shadowy rumor, new locations are targeted for the 7 p.m. search.

When darkness falls, Donna shoots over to consult with Jennifer's parents, Kenneth and Karen. Kenneth Schweiger has been out each day on his own, desperately seeking some trace of his daughter.

They compare notes, discuss new approaches, then start the

telephone work.

"Sure, I get frustrated when I think we really have something and then it turns out to be nothing," the volunteer coordinator said. "But, you wake up the next day and you build yourself up again. If I were Karen, I wouldn't want people to give up."

Her briefcase stuffed with Jennifer posters, maps, notes and telephone numbers for almost every official in the city and state, Donna arrives home as the hour nears midnight.

"I live between Willowbrook (the Staten Island Developmental Center) and Jennifer's house. It could have been my child," the volunteer coordinator said when asked why she has taken such an active role in the search. Donna's two stepchildren also live in the area.

One of her children is physically impaired, an added reason for her intense concern for Jennifer, who has Down's syndrome.

Some days, Donna brings her children to the church while organizing the search. Other times her parents help out by watching them while she and Charles take to the streets and wooded lots.

Many a night, maps and folders have been spread around the Cutugnos' apartment as they work with people trying to piece together the mystery of Jennifer's disappearance.

"This kitchen table is like the headquarters," Donna said in her home last night as she wondered what she would give her children for dinner. "My kids have never eaten so much take-out."

Although the drive to locate Jennifer has taken most of the Cutugnos' private family time, the shared goal has brought Charles and Donna closer together. Cutugno, operating on his own and occasionally with a few of the volunteers, has been using his expertise as an accident investigator to follow up some of the more elusive leads.

"I think we've developed more respect for each other now than we ever had before this," Charles said as he scouted for a pair of pants for his son, Devin.

Whether dealing with exposure to television cameras or mosquitos and low branches, Donna ex-

hibits an unflappable manner that always seems to find the best use for a volunteer's talents. Former SIDC patients are encouraged to use their familiarity with the facility to help search the buildings, while former servicemen are directed to search the rugged terrain.

While coercing a politician to support the search for Jennifer, or trying to get additional posters printed, Donna's theme has become: "Do what you have to do."

One day, Donna had arranged for trained dogs to help search the grounds, and for a psychic to visit the facility to "feel" for impressions, but needed to be accompanied by a police officer. Donna's requests for an officer went unanswered, and she opted to slip on the grounds and risk the consequences.

"On the way there she jumps out and flags down these officers,"

her husband explained. Three Emergency Services Unit officers were scheduled for their lunch hour, but gave in to Donna's near tearful pleas and wound up helping search the SIDC grounds instead of eating.

The telephone continued ringing last night as straggling volunteers called for directions and tipsters left information. If lucky, Donna will be able to get to the grocery store for some quick shopping before it gets too late.

Devin was engrossed watching a video tape of "Super Grover," when Donna's 2-year-old daughter, Trina, toddled innocently into the kitchen and asked "Where's Jennifer?"

Donna gathers up her folders and notes, asking the little girl, "What are mommy and daddy trying to do?"

"Find her," Trina answered.

Minor casualties have been suffered: Cuts and rashes. One of the most active volunteers, Fran Auriti of New Dorp, was forced out of action temporarily by a serious case of poison sumac.

"Fran, she's given up her home life for this," said Donna Cutugno, search coordinator.

Soda and ice have been donated to refresh the volunteers. The Red Cross routinely sets up a mobile kitchen to provide a rest station.

Searchers admit the focus of the hunt has changed. In the beginning they were called upon to look for signs Jennifer had been in the area. Now it has turned to a hunt for mounds of earth, bits of clothing, or "anything out of the ordinary."

Robert Vasquez of Oakwood one night led a contingent of six off-duty special-operations officers for the New Jersey Depart-

ment of Corrections into Sea View as part of the search.

"We are trained for everything, field search, tracking escaped prisoners. We'll be here until about 1 a.m.," Vasquez said. "Then, they'll (the officers) be at work at 6 a.m. with 16,000 prisoners to worry about."

The regular volunteers concede that at times depression and disappointment begin to eat away at their drive.

"I try to push it back. Once you feel pessimistic, it's all over," said Linda Farina, who, along with her husband, Robert, had been searching independently until the Friends of Jennifer pulled people together.

"Every day you just keep hoping and looking," Mrs. Farina said glancing at a poster of Jennifer. "I feel like I know her. That smile gets to you after a while."

While most of the volunteers grimly face the idea that Jennifer may have fallen victim to foul play, a strong inner hope that somehow the girl would be found safe and alive runs through the group.

"Frustration can lead to determination, and that's what the case is here," said Robert Neimis as the searchers prepared to head out once again.

Darkened woods and rumors of devil worshipers have sent rivers of fear washing over volunteers, but they forge on.

"The hardest part is running home, trying to get dinner on the table, then running back," Mrs. Farina explained. "Looking through the woods is the easy part."

From the hard-core searchers like Glenna Ohara, Mary Reilly, Bill Reddy and others, to the occa-

sional volunteers, people are coming away with a broader awareness of the dangers facing children in the community, Mrs. Cutugno said.

By nightfall last night, searchers had found no trace of Jennifer, but did come across a campsite hidden behind the Baron Hirsch Cemetery. Members of the Friends of Jennifer planned to return to the campsite today to try to confirm suspicions the campsite may have once been home to Andre Rand, the man charged with kidnapping Jennifer.

Anyone wishing to help find Jennifer can join volunteers daily at the Holy Family Church on Watchogue Road in Westerleigh at noon and 7 p.m. People with information concerning Jennifer can contact police at a 24-hour hotline number, 447-4168.