

# Jennifer search turns into vigil outside SIDC

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A frantic phone call last night from volunteer search leader Donna Cutugno brought her sister, Lori Esposito, to the Willowbrook grounds where authorities were unearthing a body feared to be Jennifer Schweiger's.

But Miss Esposito immediately melted into the swarming crowd that was being detained by officials outside the main gate of the Staten Island Developmental Center at Victory Boulevard.

For hours, they waited anxiously for news while more than 50 officials scoured the shallow grave site in the woods.

Even volunteers, who for the past five weeks have searched diligently for the 12-year-old Westerleigh girl with Down's syndrome, were barred from crossing the Victory Boulevard entrance.

In keeping with their actions throughout the search, they refocused their energy to help the authorities by directing traffic at the intersection jammed with TV crews, speeding police cars and some 200 onlookers.

Curious passersby, some barely older than Jennifer, mingled with others more personally involved in the search. They were just as eager for information as frustrated reporters from many news organizations who were locked out of the main gate. Officials periodically released bits of information.

Among the crowd, two teenagers arriving on the scene silently blessed themselves.

An Oakwood couple, huddled pensively against a TV truck, quietly waited for any news. Though not part of the official Friends of Jennifer volunteer group, the pair several times have looked on their own. Last night they were searching near the SIDC when they realized there had been some kind of discovery.

Irene Moss of Willowbrook didn't know the family, but "they rang our bell when they were looking for her. All the (neighborhood) kids have been involved in the search and there a lot of concerned parents."

Members from Friends of Jennifer traded stories on recent searches, and even in light of last night's grim discovery, some still hoped they would find the girl alive.

"If it is a kid out there, we hope it's not Jennifer. We're looking forward to finding her alive," said James Burrus, from Richmond County R.E.A.C.T. and Child Find.

Others, much less optimistic, replaced their drive to find the girl with determination to see her suspected kidnapper, Andre Rand, brought to justice.

"We have to assume it's Jennifer, but that leaves two others that we know of," said Robert Niemis, referring to the disappearances of Holly Anne Hughes and Tiahese Jackson, which have also been linked to Rand.

"We're not stopping... we're going to keep on going. Even if tomorrow there's a positive I.D., we don't know this guy will be nailed. We have to be positive we have enough evidence to nail him," he said.

Niemis, a Queens resident, has been involved through Staten Island friends in the search effort since Jennifer's July 9 disappearance. After searching last night, he was one of the last volunteers to leave their headquarters at Holy Child R.C. Church in Westerleigh.

"I hope to God it is not her," said Kathy Barbarino of Willowbrook, whose mother works for Spotlight Printing Center in St. George, which provided free posters of the missing girl. "I have cousins with Down's syndrome. This is a sin."

Similar sympathy for Jennifer's family ran high in the crowd.

But for a moment, panic overtook one personally involved onlooker. Miss Esposito was shaken when her sister, Mrs. Cutugno, was whisked away in a police car to the Schweiger's house.

Regaining her composure, Miss Esposito's attention returned to Jennifer.

"I hope she's alive," she said. "I just hope they do justice to the man who did it."