



ADVANCE PHOTO/TONY CARAMANTE

Friends and neighbors of the Schweigers stand and wait word about Jennifer.

Neighbors' hope fades into silence

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Voices kept to whispers. People hovered on front stoops or paced the sidewalk. They shook their heads, smoked cigarettes and wished the pain away.

Jennifer Schweiger's block in Westerleigh looked like a hospital waiting room early this morning as her neighbors and friends stood vigil following word that searchers found a body near the car site of the man charged with her disappearance.

Two police cars blocked off Wardwell Avenue between Walters Avenue and Markham Place, and a third squad car guarded the home of the 12-year-old, missing since July 9.

Only yesterday, teen-ager filled the area with their touch of hope — yellow ribbons tied on fences, mailboxes, flagpoles and stoop bannisters.

"It just symbolizes that we're waiting for her to come home," said Michelle Chicola, 14, who helped spread around 200 yards of ribbon.

Her eyes were puffy and she said she'd been crying. But Michelle Chicola, who joined the search for Jennifer, didn't want to say if she believed the little girl was dead. That was too scary a thought, she said. It was as if giving words to her fears might make them come true.

Ms. Chicola was among about 10 teen-agers waiting around the corner from the Schweiger home. It was after midnight and they passed the time asking questions of a Ouija board. They said they did not ask it about Jennifer's fate.

Another teen who tied yellow ribbons, Jennifer Bush, 14, also said "no comment" to the dread question. Like most people, she wanted something "definite" to go on, not the Channel 7 broadcast that said the body was Jennifer's even though officials did not make a positive identification or even give the sex or approximate age of the victim discovered in a shallow grave Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook.

Some people said they were angry about the premature broadcast. One mother said her three children and two kids she was babysitting broke into tears over the news. She also said the kids were frightened of Andre Rand, the 43-year-old transient arrested Aug. 6 and charged with kidnapping the girl. The mother said she tried to offer some comfort to the kids.

"I asked them, would you rather see Jennifer with that man or would you rather see her in heaven?"

Another neighbor, who like almost everyone on the block wanted to remain nameless out of respect for the vigil, said he wanted to remain hopeful. However this man, who said he's spent time everyday since the girl disappeared searching for her, said he was running low on hope. "We're hoping it's not her, but I... have a feeling it is."

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