

Parents hit 'badly,' but praise searchers

By ALICE McQUILLAN
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She had filled the block with yellow ribbons in the hope Jennifer Schweiger would return home. But when Jennifer Bush walked that street yesterday, she had to take down the missing girl's poster.

"I just hope she's all right in heaven," said the 14-year-old.

With confirmation that a body, as feared, was that of 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger, people on her Westerleigh block held tight to each other. They hugged, wiped red eyes and, in pain, remembered the Down's syndrome girl whose smiling face on the poster tugged at hearts throughout the borough and the city.

"I used to baby-sit her a lot," said Laurieann Kelly, 17, who stood with tears in her eyes outside the Schweiger home on Wardwell Avenue. "I used to fix lunch for her. She was a very lovable person."

"She was always laughing," added Ms. Kelly, whose voice began to crack. "You know, she loved everybody."

Ms. Kelly said she couldn't compose herself enough to join the mourners visiting the family. Jennifer's parents stayed behind closed doors, declining to speak to reporters waiting across the street.

Instead, the Schweigers issued a written statement after receiving official word that it was their daughter.

"The last five weeks have been extremely difficult ones for the family," said Betty Jean Fleming, a cousin, in a wavering voice. "But the support and love that has been given to them by family and friends has sustained and strengthened them."

"They want to express their sincerest appreciation to everyone who has offered assistance, and especially to the hundreds of volunteers who have been searching and praying for such a long time."

The leader of the volunteer search that attracted about 1,000 people, Donna Cutugno, said the Schweiger family spent most of the day crying and praying. She spoke of "relief" in finally knowing Jennifer's fate and pledged help in finding at least three other Staten Island children missing for years.

"I hope this uncovers a lot more and that some of the other families can also have the same peace that the Schweigers have," she said.

Other searchers from Richmond County R.E.A.C.T. and Child Find visited the family. Thomas Chapland was among three uniformed volunteers who said they



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Dennis Wonica, a relative of the Schweiger family, is comforted.

spent "every day, 18 hours a day" looking for Jennifer.

"We've got a lot more hurt than anything," he said. "We wanted to find her alive, not dead."

The Rev. Henry Gentile of Holy Family R.C. Church said he led a prayer service in the family's backyard when news of Jennifer's death reached them. He said the Schweigers "took it very badly of course." But he called them "very strong people."

"Their faith has made them go through this whole period of 35 days, so I would think they could sustain the future very strongly," he said.

He praised the neighborhood as "unbelievable" in its support for the family and remembered their little girl as a "beautiful innocent creature."

"Every Sunday she'd smile, she'd come into the church," said Father Gentile. "She'd lighten up the church."