

Jennifer was murdered

Cops in all-out search for more bodies in woods

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A specialized team of police officers continue to prowls the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center and dig for clues in the murder of Jennifer Schweiger, whose body was identified yesterday as that of the girl found in a shallow grave Wednesday night.

When asked if a connection between this case and those of other missing Staten Island children was a factor in the present investigation, Capt. William Wallace would only say, "We are keeping an open mind toward other cases similar to the one involving Rand."

His reference was to Andre Rand, the homeless man accused of kidnapping Jennifer who may now face murder charges.

Meanwhile, police officials and members of the missing girl's family yesterday praised the determination and perseverance of volunteers who refused to give up the hunt for the missing girl, and discovered her body.

The girl's body was dug up after a team of renegade volunteer searchers, acting on the intuition of George Kramer of Great Kills, defied a security ban, slipped onto the grounds and discovered the

gravesite behind Building 27.

Jennifer Schweiger's nude body, encased in dirt to preserve any possible evidence, was rushed to the medical examiner's Manhattan office yesterday at about 3 a.m.

Medical Examiner Elliot Gross ruled the death murder, but by last night had not determined the cause of death, according to Wallace, commander of Staten Island's detective force. The medical examiner planned tests to determine if the girl was sexually abused.

Gross yesterday confirmed the belief of volunteers that it was Jennifer Schweiger who was found buried about 50 yards from a campsite once used by Andre Rand. Rand was arrested last week and charged with kidnapping Jennifer from a street near her Wardwell Avenue home on July 9.

Police Chief Robert J. Johnston lauded the volunteer effort yesterday at a press conference in the 122nd Precinct stationhouse in New Dorp.

"Probably the thing that did us the most good were the volunteers," Johnston said. "I want to give them all the credit because if it hadn't been for them we would not have discovered the body."

Hundreds of caring Island residents, joined by

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people from other states and boroughs, joined forces under the leadership of Donna Cutugno of Westerleigh and formed a group called the Friends of Jennifer. Undaunted by heat, rainstorms, rats, insects, poison ivy and repeated frustrations, members of the group searched for Jennifer daily. It was a bold team of veteran searchers that found Jennifer's grave Wednesday.

Karen Schweiger, Jennifer's mother, said yesterday she wanted to thank "everybody on Staten Island who helped by praying and searching for our daughter."

"I cannot say too much in praise of the civilian effort," Wallace, an Island resident himself, later added. "I'm glad I have them for neighbors."

But while Wednesday's grim discovery acts as an unpleasant fulfillment of the volunteers' goal, police now face the task of sifting through acres of soil in an effort to find evidence in the case.

"Forty officers are out there right now, six dogs, one backhoe, and a lot of shovels," Johnston said at the 10 a.m. press conference yesterday.

The police chief said the search would continue in the thick woods around the grave and Rand's campsite "to see if there are any other bodies or persons buried or

who had been buried there in the past."

Police Chief of Patrol John P. McCabe and Inspector Richard McBride, commander of the Island's patrol forces, directed the search through the day. Two large special operations division trucks yesterday remained parked at the mouth of the path leading to the gravesite. Plastic bags were piled behind one of the trucks, while an array of shovels leaned against the side of the vehicle.

Large trees had been cleared away from the area around the grave, leaving a 30-foot-long gash in the tangled, overgrown area.

Several officers worked from two special crime scene unit station wagons which were parked on an old handball court that bordered the lot containing the gravesite and Rand's campsite. A path leading to the campsite, which was cordoned off with red ribbon, had been cut into the woods bordering the handball court. A bulldozer remained parked next to the court.

Police vans and cars continually flowed to and from the site, and at 3 p.m., 30 officers regrouped. Detectives were stationed on the scene to examine any possible evidence the search turned up, and to aid in the hunt.

According to Wallace, specialized officers will be scouring the woods and "digging up any areas

that are suspicious looking." Police are scanning for mounds of dirt, elevated soil, soft areas, displaced roots, or any other indication of freshly dug earth.

Officers yesterday concentrated on the grounds surrounding the grave and campsite, and will gradually work outward in a circular pattern today and tomorrow, the police official explained. Several "items" were found yesterday, but none seemed to be connected with Rand or Jennifer, Wallace said. The detective commander expected the digging to continue through the weekend.

"We will dig up only those areas that have the potential of containing material that would be pertinent to the investigation," Wallace said when asked if the wooded area would be leveled during the search. Johnston has offered Island investigators any help or equipment they need in the hunt, authorities reported.

Police at the scene early yesterday morning said the area would be "torn apart."

Most of the digging is being done with hand shovels, with the backhoe used only if the unearthing of potential clues brings on the need to go deeper than about two feet.

Investigators are anxiously awaiting the cause of the girl's death in the hope it will give them a new perspective on information they already have in the case, and help them know what to look for in the search.

Wallace added that detectives

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