

Schweiger exclusive: The agony

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Pooling all of their love and inner strength, Jennifer Schweiger's family is bravely trying to overcome the news of the girl's untimely death and pull together the pieces of a future shattered by the brutal killing.

"As I left Willowbrook to go home, I looked out of the car and saw this big moon between the trees," the emotionally drained father said while recalling the night he rushed to the Staten Island Developmental Center after a young girl's body was found buried there. "It was time for it to come to an end. I don't think we could have gone on, we would have had to though."

Karen and Kenneth Schweiger shared heartfelt glances, supportive touches, and an occasional encouraging smile during an hour-long exclusive interview with the Advance in the kitchen of their Wardwell Avenue home in Westerleigh Friday night.

It was exactly five weeks from the day and hour of Jennifer's disappearance that Karen and Kenneth Schweiger received the telephone call telling them it was their daughter who had been found murdered.

"We sat up all night waiting for some word" of the body's identity, Mrs. Schweiger said in a low voice as she recalled the hours after they received word that the body was being dug out of the shallow grave near the campsite of accused kidnapper Andre Rand. "We still held onto a ray of hope even then."

The loss was felt across the Island by thousands of people who felt as Kenneth Schweiger did that "Jennifer was everybody's child."

Jennifer was reportedly last seen walking with Rand on the SIDC grounds when she disappeared the afternoon of July 1. Rand is a man with a history of crimes against children.

Medical Examiner Elliot Gross confirmed Thursday that it was Jennifer Schweiger who had been murdered and buried in the gravesite. Rand has also been identified as a suspect in the disappearances of at least three other Island children and one woman.

Neighbors gathered at a nearby home Friday night to speak about Kenneth Schweiger's relentless drive to search the SIDC grounds.

"I felt she was still in Willowbrook. With all of the abandoned buildings and tunnels, you could go through there 25 times, and the 26th could be it," the father explained sadly. "I kept going back. Every day I would check the room

next to the pool first, then at the end of the day I would check it again."

Because police were using dogs to track Jennifer's scent for the first six days of the search, Kenneth Schweiger was barred from the grounds of the facility. He turned to canvassing other parts of the neighborhood, as well as handling telephone calls from investigators and volunteers.

"Then Detective (Ralph) Aquino took my wife out to two spots at Willowbrook, and that was it," Schweiger said calmly. "I was going."

The hunt became a seemingly endless series of strategy sessions, sleepless or near sleepless nights, long searches and prayers. Schweiger went out determinedly on daily missions that included leading a team of New York Telephone employees to pull manhole covers at SIDC, and heading a band of Vietnam veterans on a sweep of the grounds.

Thirty-five pounds of coffee were consumed by the volunteers and family members who breezed in and out of the Schweiger's home for weeks, a pound for each day of the hunt.

"We've been praying on our own, then we would go to bed and say, 'Where do we go next?'" the father recounted solemnly. "All of the buildings I've been through, and all of the manhole covers I've pulled . . . Your mind becomes a sponge and you don't know what to think."

The daily planning and hectic pace was "like a strategic attack," Schweiger remembered.

"We believed he handed her off to somebody who was taking care of her," Mrs. Schweiger said. "We had to have that or we would have collapsed."

Behind her, a crayon picture Jennifer had drawn of a house and yard decorated a calendar hanging on a closet door.

From the moment his 12-year-old daughter vanished, Schweiger, his heart and mind focused on finding the girl, abandoned any thoughts of going to work at his

job as an assistant accountant with the telephone company. The company immediately granted Schweiger time off, and went on to send out workers and supplies to help in the search.

"I just want one more week off," Schweiger said as he tried to put his thoughts, and future, in perspective.

"Oh no, I need you longer than that," his wife shot back.

"I don't know, we'll have to take it day by day," the husband responded. And that is exactly how Mrs. Schweiger said she would be facing the time ahead of her — one day at a time.

Friends and close family members provide love, words of encouragement and a reassuring presence as the Schweigers somberly go ahead with the ceremonies leading up to Jennifer's funeral tomorrow.

Joan Thomas' Irish soda bread was among the foods taken to the Schweiger house during the mourning period. Mrs. Schweiger cut a piece while her husband spoke.

"I think it's going to be rough going back to work," Schweiger said quietly. "Facing the questions and the people who donated a lot of time and pledged money to the Jennifer Fund. Facing them is like facing reality. You have to face reality again, face the world again, start over."

While the Schweigers were coping with the search and the murder of their daughter, newspapers containing possibly painful stories about Jennifer were intercepted at the doorstep. Members of the family conceded they have not seen a newspaper in weeks.

"Right now, she's carrying me," Kenneth Schweiger said, reaching out to his wife. "I know I'm going to have to be ready to carry her when she comes down. It didn't all come out for both of us — one day it will."

In time, the family hopes to regroup their thoughts and "get back on track."

"We had our whole life laid out," the father said in a hushed voice, "and it's just a matter of

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