

Our opinion

The end of the fear; The beginning of grief

For the Schweiger family and all their friends, the nightmare is finally over. Now the long years of pain begin.

Of all the horrible things that people can do to each other, few are more disturbing or more horrifying than the abuse and murder of a child.

When that child is as innocent and as helpless as Jennifer Schweiger was, the act is all the more appalling.

Apparently, because she was so trusting and saw the world so simply, she accompanied, without question, a person who meant her the most hideous kind of harm.

Because she was so unaware of evil, the malevolence of the person who would hurt her is that much greater, and the pain of her parents, her family, her friends and her community is that much more difficult to bear.

A world which allows such a monstrous act frightens us, throws us off our moorings and makes us wonder dark thoughts. That the same community which provides us with our humdrum daily routines — the same streets, the same stores, the same familiar faces — could suddenly confront us with such horror is frightening. That such people could be among us shatters our trust in our home town.

We want to make it right, and eventually our minds will do us the favor of wrapping this atrocity in a web of time and storing it away. It's fortunate that a community can forget.

But on a hot Thursday in July, something evil claimed a harmless child in our midst, and ended her life in the cruelest way imaginable, and we will never quite get over it.

In Jennifer's Roman Catholic faith, it is taught that children are the creatures nearest to God. Surely a child such as Jennifer Schweiger is closer still today.

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An event as grim as this has no bright spots, and we wouldn't dare trivialize the Schweigers' grief with Pollyanna-isms.

But in the nearly five weeks since Jennifer Schweiger disappeared, there were many, many Staten Islanders who showed they cared, and their concern and help were much appreciated, by the family, by the authorities, by all of us.

The only satisfactory conclusion to their efforts, of course, would have been the safe return of Jennifer. For reasons we will never know, that was not to be.

But that in no way diminishes the powerful sense of community that this tragedy engendered. It was as if the many good people of this borough believed that if they banded together, their combined good will could overwhelm whatever bad thing had happened to Jennifer.

In a way it did. From the neighbors who mothered the Schweigers through their ordeal, to all the people who gave up their days and nights to help with the search, to the police officers who showed their dedication, professionalism and humanity, Islanders reaffirmed for each other that this is a place where people care; where when trouble comes, you're not alone.

The teen-agers, mothers with children, veterans, civil service workers, union men, commuters who came home, changed and went out looking — they all took a strong stand not just for the Schweigers, but for their own families, for the place they call home, for each other, for all of us.

And in that same spirit, we have been reminded that one last job remains.

At one time, the thousands upon thousands of "FIND JENNIFER SCHWEIGER" posters around Staten Island were a positive sign of that overwhelming community response. But now they are a taunting, haunting reminder of this tragedy, and they must be torture for Jennifer's family and friends to see.

We hope Islanders will pitch in to remove these posters from poles, windows and trees as quickly as possible to spare the Schweiger family any more hurt.

During the course of the investigation, the Police Department gave some grim indications that the suspect in the murder of Jennifer Schweiger had been involved in several other disappearances of children, including those of Holly Ann Hughes in 1981 and Tiahese Jackson in 1983.

These other cases were never solved, and the little girls were never found.

We hope that the suspect now in custody can provide information on these other disappearances, so that these children's families can begin to grasp for some sort of grieving peace.

But if he can't or won't point the way, we think that the police should take the volunteers' up on their determined offer and continue searching until these children are found. It won't be easy, but the volunteers are there — experienced, organized and willing.

Unfortunately, detective work hasn't turned up much in these cases. It may take an all-out search, of certain areas the suspect was known to frequent, including the Staten Island Developmental Center grounds. There will never be another opportunity — we fervently hope — to be able to mobilize such a large search party.

That may be what is necessary to clear up these lingering, and painful, mysteries.

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