

Rand denies he killed girl

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Andre Rand, the man charged with kidnaping 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger says he did not kill the Staten Island girl whose body was discovered in a shallow grave last week near his campsite, it was reported today.

"It just happened out of the clear blue," Rand, 43, told the New York Daily News. "I'm sure in my mind and heart I had nothing to do with" the killing.

In an interview at the psychiatric ward of Kings County Hospital, Rand said he "just broke down" when he learned that Jennifer's body had been found Wednesday night on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook, a former mental institution where he had worked as an aide.

"When I heard she was found dead I cried," he said. "I really wanted them to find her alive."

Rand is undergoing psychiatric testing at Kings County Hospital and is due to return to court Sept. 4.

Rand also said he tried to kill himself last week by hanging himself in his cell with his shirt, but was stopped by correction officers. Lowell Goldberg, Kings County Hospital associate director, said he would not comment on Rand's suicide attempt remarks.

Hundreds turn out to mourn Jennifer

By GLENN CHAPMAN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Three color photographs of a smiling, warm-hearted young girl rested on a stand next to a small, closed white coffin in a room lined with flowers during the weekend as the Schweiger family, along with hundreds of Staten Island residents, mourned the death of Jennifer.

A massive turn-out of caring friends, relatives and volunteers who helped in the search for the girl is expected today at a funeral mass in Holy Family R.C. Church, Westerleigh. Cardinal John O'Connor is expected to attend the services.

Hundreds of friends and family members crowded into a large room in the Harmon Home for Funerals Saturday and Sunday nights where they said prayers for 12-year-old Jennifer Lyn Schweiger. The girl vanished from the street near her Wardwell Avenue home in Westerleigh July 9, an apparent kidnap victim.

A determined group of volunteers found her body buried in a shallow grave at Staten Island Developmental Center, just a short distance from a campsite used by Andre Rand, the man charged with kidnaping the girl. Jennifer had been murdered and Medical Examiner Elliott Gross is still conducting tests to determine how the girl died.

Many of the volunteers attending the wake didn't recognize each other at first, having grown used to seeing each other only wearing hiking boots, jeans with the pantlegs tucked into their socks and T-shirts during weeks of crawling through dense wooded lots on Staten Island.

Borough President Ralph Lamberti and detectives working on the murdered girl's case joined others in prayer and grieving Saturday and last night. Tears and solemn glances were mixed with questions about the continued search by police for traces of Jennifer's clothing, as well as other bodies, on the grounds of SIDC.

Working their way out from the grave and campsite, a special team of police officers using hand shovels and other equipment continued examining section after section of ground during the weekend. Any sign of irregularity was reason to begin digging.

Detectives from Staten Island and Manhattan are studying more than 30 other cases to see if there is a possible link to Rand, a 43-year-old transient with a history of crimes against children. Rand has been viewed as a suspect in

the disappearances of three other Island children, as well as a New Jersey woman who worked at SIDC.

Police handling the investigation said no new evidence or traces of other bodies had been discovered as of last night.

Jennifer's parents, Ken and Karen Schweiger, stood with other family members next to the small coffin, sharing support and strength as they accepted the words of concern and offers of help from those who had gathered to pay tribute to the child.

Over the weekend, volunteers who once searched relentlessly for Jennifer solemnly turned some of their effort to tearing down many of the reward posters that had been tacked up across the Island.

The rest of their effort went to searching for Jennifer's clothing or other evidence in the case, as well as traces of the other missing girls.