

# An 'innocent' whose death touched us all

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ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

She was an innocent victim whose death has "touched hearts all over the world" and "is even now in the arms of almighty God," Cardinal John O'Connor told mourners yesterday during the funeral mass for Jennifer Schweiger.

An overflow crowd of more than 500 people, many of them volunteers who searched for the girl during the 34 days she was missing, gathered in Holy Family R.C. Church, Westerleigh, for the 70-minute service.

Cardinal O'Connor called the 12-year-old "truly sinless," and "an immense gift, an indescribable gift that God gave to this world."

The child's parents, Karen and Kenneth, and brother, Ken Jr., followed the tiny, ivory colored and gilt casket into the church.

The Schweigers were flanked by Detectives Ralph Aquino and Robert Jensen, who have handled the case.

Charles Cutugno, the husband of volunteer coordinator Donna Cutugno, read a passage from the Book of Lamentations, which describes how the faithfulness of God brings hope in times of grief. Sgt. Ronald Jacobs, who was among the searchers who uncov-

ered Jennifer's shallow grave, read from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

The cardinal said that on his way to the church he received a call from Mayor Edward I. Koch, who said his doctors advised him not to attend the funeral. "Would you tell the family how grateful we are to them for their example?" the cardinal quoted the mayor as saying.

Koch also told O'Connor he was sending a \$500 contribution to the foundation for Down's syndrome children.

In addition, Mother Teresa called the cardinal and said: "Would you please tell everybody there that I'm having all of my sisters, including myself" pray throughout the entire time of the funeral.

"Not for the soul of Jennifer — everyone knows where that is — but for the family, and all who have been involved. So people's hearts are being touched all over the world," Cardinal O'Connor said.

Bishop Patrick V. Ahern, the episcopal vicar of Staten Island, said in the homily that the white dress Jennifer was being buried in "speaks of the lovely innocence of a simple child.

"Few go through life without staining their baptismal robe and staining it many a time. ... But

not Jennifer Schweiger ... that dear, loveable child. (She) never even knew what sin is," Ahern said. "God did withhold from her some of the gifts he gives to others, but to her He gave the most wonderful gift of all. The gift of perfect innocence."

"No wonder everybody loved

her so. That warm and friendly smile . . . that smile which charmed us all," Bishop Ahern added.

Cardinal O'Connor and Bishop Ahern both praised the Schweigers for their enormous strength.

The cardinal called the Schweigers "an enormous example of courage to all of us.

"It was their faith and courage that inspired so many, and that was born in their love for this youngster," he said.

Bishop Ahern told the Schweigers that "our hearts go out to you in sympathy for the cruel sorrow into which this has plunged you.

"Endlessly day after day, night after night, they cared for her, they loved her, they never counted the cost, they never felt it was anything but a privilege to serve this precious child of God," he said.

The bishop said he was sure "there is not a person on Staten Island or in the whole city of New

York who does not want to give you a piece of his or her heart."

Prior to the final prayers, Cardinal O'Connor asked the mourners to express their gratitude to the Cutugnos.

"Sometimes this would be considered a very tasteless thing to do. But there's so much emotion here. There has been so much pent up for so long," the cardinal said. "And I think there are so many of you that would want to say something and don't have the opportunity."

At that moment the audience broke into thunderous applause for the couple.

Following the service, the casket was driven to St. Mary's Cemetery in Lakewood, N.J.

Jennifer, who vanished July 9 while walking near her Wardwell Avenue home, was found in a shallow grave last Wednesday evening on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Andre Rand, a 43-year old drifter who was last seen walking

hand-in-hand with the girl, according to police, is charged in connection with her disappearance and is currently undergoing psychiatric evaluation in Kings County Hospital, Brooklyn.

Mrs. Cutugno said after the funeral that it's "very important that you have an ending to each story. Unfortunately, the other families (of other missing children) don't have an ending yet, so that makes it even harder.

"At one point I thought that we would stop for awhile, then when you see the faces of the other families, there's no way you can stop," she said. "You can't. You have to continue searching."

Hours after the hearse carrying Jennifer's small casket was given a police escort to the Outerbridge Crossing, volunteers gathered at the Holy Family Church to resume the search for the girl's clothing, as well as traces of any other children who may have suffered a fate similar to Jennifer's.

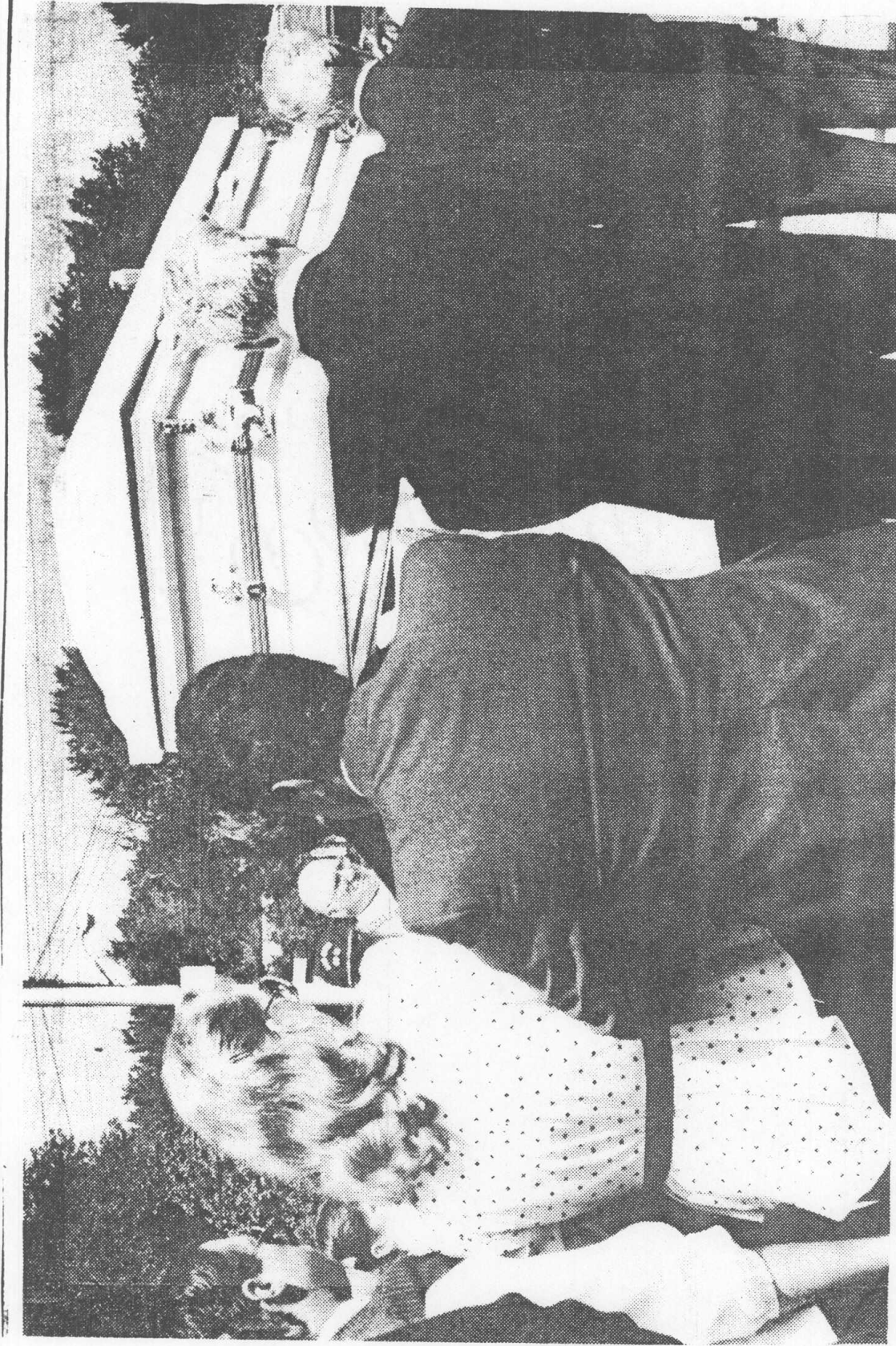
Volunteers plan to continue meeting nightly at 7 at the church.



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Detectives and friends escort the Schweigers into church.

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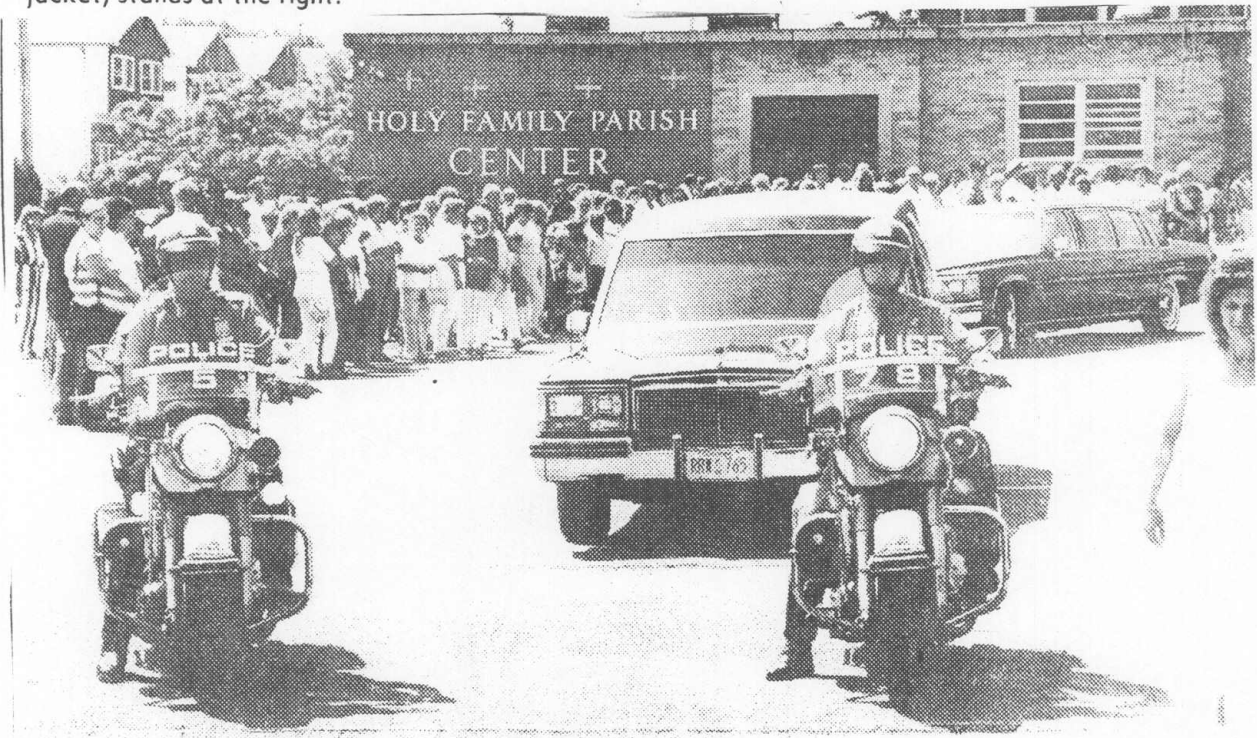
The small white coffin containing the body of 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger is carried from Holy Family R. C. Church, Westerleigh, followed by Mrs. Schweiger and Mr. Schweiger on her left.

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ADVANCE PHOTO/TONY CARANNANTE

Kenneth Schweiger is embraced by Cardinal John O'Connor. Jennifer's brother, Ken Jr., in white jacket, stands at the right.



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A police motorcycle escort leads the funeral procession from the church following the service.

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