

Unsolved cases haunt Willowbrook

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If the notorious past of the old Willowbrook State School had begun to fade in recent years, the Jennifer Schweiger murder has resurrected some ghosts on the campus.

The arrest of Andre Rand, the accused kidnapper of the 12-year-old Westerleigh girl, has led police to dredge up more than 30 unsolved cases of mysterious deaths and disappearances, a

number on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), the former state school for the mentally retarded.

Jennifer's body was unearthed there on Aug. 12, only 50 yards from Rand's wooded campsite. Her July 9 disappearance triggered a massive police and volunteer search that often focused on the Willowbrook grounds, where the Down's syndrome child was last seen walking with Rand.

The case has triggered some observers, including Community

Board 2, to criticize SIDC security. But James Walsh, center director, said that with 382 acres, "there's no way of securing it unless you put up a barbed-wire fence with 24-hour guards patrolling, and turn it into a prison. We have no intention of doing that."

Abandoned buildings on the site evoke the "snakepit" and "chamber of horrors" images tagged to the school in the early 1960s, when more than 6,000 patients were crammed into the facility de-

signed for 4,500.

During that decade, Rand played a bit part in the school's history. Under one of several aliases he has used, he worked as a temporary physical-therapy aide from 1966 to 1968.

More recently, he was known to sit on a set of bleachers on the grounds and have coffee and a doughnut almost every morning. The balding man on his bicycle was a normal part of the scenery around the center. And his campsite among the trees across from

Building 27 could be pointed out by a number of SIDC workers, who also knew that he sometimes slept in one of the former kitchen buildings.

Walsh said that "we didn't know he was living here," and that there were instances where guards "escorted him off the grounds."

He could not answer why the workers who saw Rand with Jennifer did not intervene to get her away from the transient.

"That is a Police Department matter and I will not get in-

involved," Walsh said. "I don't know the circumstances."

The 43-year-old Rand, who is undergoing psychiatric evaluation in Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn, was arrested Aug. 4 and charged with Jennifer's kidnapping. No one has yet been charged with the girl's murder.

Rand is to return to Stapleton Criminal Court on Friday for his first appearance on the kidnapping charge.

Since Jennifer's disappearance,

the parents of SIDC's 149 clients "have never once called my office" with complaints or questions, Walsh said.

As SIDC prepares to close in a few weeks, 26 patients will be transferred to group homes throughout New York state and New Jersey, but the remaining 123 clients with severe developmental disabilities will continue to be cared for at the facility, he said. The state has created a Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office to take over the center's work.

SIDC's closing is meant to be another step away from the specter of Willowbrook's infamous past.

But there are some pieces from that haunted history that have not been put to rest.

The following is a chronological look at cases involving disappearances from or deaths at the institution. Walsh and his staff provided any updated information available.

● Sept. 28, 1970 — Roland Ortiz, a 20-year-old deaf mute patient at the Willowbrook school, disappeared that afternoon from the institution. Ortiz returned several days later, apparently unharmed, Walsh said. What happened to the patient for those few days is still a mystery.

● June 12, 1971 — Patricia Varon, a 16-year-old patient at Willowbrook, was reported missing. Less than four hours later, she was found dead in a steam tunnel in a building on the school grounds.

Walsh said her death was determined accidental. The cause probably was asphyxiation or the heat, if there was some reason for the steam to be on in the spring, he said. The medical records listing the cause will not be available until late this week.

● Oct. 18, 1972 — Jeanette Martin, 16, who disappeared in September from the former Start Center for juvenile delinquents, was reported still missing after six weeks.

Walsh had no record of the case, because the center was run by the state Division for Youth, which would not release any information on the matter. As of Friday night, the Police Department's Missing Persons unit was not able to find records of the case, but a spokesman said they should be able to locate the file by the end of the week.

● Dec. 24, 1972 — Tyrone Coruyo, a 13-year-old Willowbrook State School patient, died from extensive brain damage, possibly caused by a series of blows to the head, according to an autopsy.

Police at the time said the death did not seem "overtly suspicious" considering conditions in the school, but were investigating because of reports of assaults upon patients.

Though the Medical Examiner never sent the final report to the center, Walsh said there must not have been enough evidence to discipline a worker or press charges. As a matter of formality, he plans to request a copy of the report.

● May 1, 1975 — Early in the morning, Michael Romano, a 64-year-old mentally retarded resident of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, was found dead, sitting on a bench near Building 4. He was missing since dinnertime on the previous night.

Romano was described by a Willowbrook spokesman as a fairly self-sufficient resident who lived in an open ward and often went on walks around the grounds but "always came back for dinner."

Police at the time believed there was no indication of foul play in Romano's death. Walsh, who was present at the autopsy, said the patient died of a heart attack.

● Aug. 7, 1978 — A police autopsy reveals that 44-year-old Shun-ae (Emma) Lee of Sea View, whose body was discovered Aug. 3 in a shallow grave in the Willowbrook woods behind the Institute

for Basic Research, was strangled to death.

The nurse was last seen July 20 walking from Building 11 after completing her 3-to-11:45 p.m. shift.

A few months before her disappearance, the nurse had reportedly received a death threat from a co-worker who was fired after Mrs. Lee gave her a negative work evaluation. At the time, police said there was no indication that the fired worker had anything to do with the murder.

No arrest has ever been made.

● Nov. 1, 1978 — Detectives continued the search for Ethel Atwell, a 46-year-old Newark resident who worked as a mental-hygiene therapist at SIDC and disappeared from a center parking lot on Oct. 24.

An employee at the center reported hearing screams coming from the parking lot around 6:30 a.m. A purse, a shoe and false teeth were found next to Ms. Atwell's car.

The woman's disappearance is still unsolved.

● Oct. 7, 1979 — Officials never learned how 29-year-old Helen Lever, a blind and deaf resident of the Staten Island Developmental Center, disappeared on the morning of July 16. She was found two days later on the grounds of the center, "unharmed and in good physical condition."

● Nov. 27, 1979 — Louis Rodriguez, a Staten Island Developmental Center patient, was found dead in Building 27, not far from the grounds where searchers found the body of Jennifer Schweiger on Aug. 12, 1987.

Rodriguez was seen leaving another building around 7:45 a.m. He was found 10 hours later after Building 27 was searched a second time.

Walsh said no foul play was suspected, but the exact cause of death was not available last week.

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