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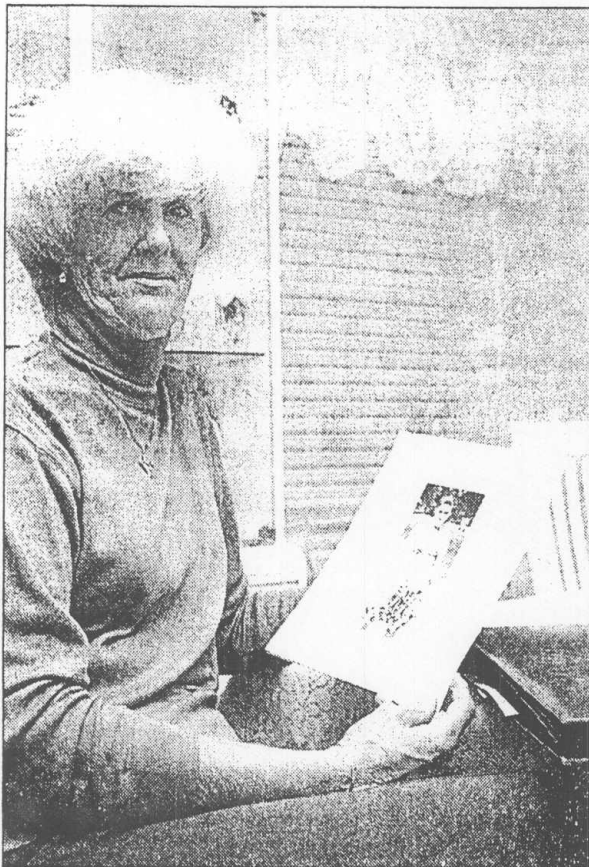


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anguish

*Eleanor Ruby Donovan disappeared
from Willowbrook State School in 1969, and her
family is still searching for an explanation*



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ MICHAEL McWEENEY

Veronica Peterson holds a photo of her younger sister, Eleanor Ruby Donovan.

By **DON GROSS**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Does anyone know what happened to Eleanor Ruby Donovan?

Her family desperately wants word of the woman who disappeared from the grounds of the former Willowbrook State School 28 years ago.

The last time any family member saw the woman — who would now be 50 years old — was the end of a weekly visit.

Victoria Nasert, one of Eleanor's sisters, said she dropped her off at the institutional school for mentally retarded children and adults at 6 p.m. on July 23, 1969.

"I was supposed to pick her up the next weekend. It was her 22nd birthday," said Mrs. Nasert of Colorado Springs, Colo., who was then a Tottenville resident.

But the day before she was supposed to pick her up, Willowbrook authorities informed her that Eleanor had "wandered off

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the grounds" and was missing, she said.

"We never heard from her again," she said.

And the little they have found out since starting this latest effort to find Eleanor has only deepened the mystery.

According to police records, Eleanor was reported missing by Willowbrook on July 24 and was "located" Sept. 23, 1969. But the file does not say what became of her, she said.

Det. Peter Zenna of the Missing Persons Squad at One Police Plaza said part of the file is missing.

"It just doesn't say what happened to her. It says she was located on Sept. 23, 1969, but it doesn't tell me where or what they did with her," he said.

It doesn't even say if they "located" her alive.

This news did little to ease the anguish family members say they have lived with all this time.

Margaret Cordova, 63, the eldest of six siblings in the Donovan family, said the years since have been filled with doubt.

"We don't know if she is dead or alive?" Mrs. Cordova said from her home in Colorado Springs where the bulk of the family now

lives. Mrs. Cordova was a Mariners Harbor resident in 1962, the year the family made the decision to place Eleanor in Willowbrook.

The family spent more than two years following the disappearance badgering officials at the institution which was located on the grounds now occupied by the College of Staten Island.

"They threatened to have me arrested," said Mrs. Nasert.

Veronica Peterson of Willowbrook, the only one of the Donovan siblings still on Staten Island, said she remembers the time when they would sneak onto the grounds and search dark corners.

"They were sick of us," she said.

Gradually, the effort slowed. Eleanor's brothers and sisters married and had children of their own. The problem was relegated to the mental and emotional places that tugged at them, but they didn't know where to turn.

"I'd drive by (Willowbrook) and look away," she said. "I just couldn't stand to see it."

But this past summer, Mrs. Peterson and her husband drove

cross-country to visit other family members in Colorado, something they had not done since the summer of 1969. They were on their way to Colorado when Eleanor disappeared, she said, so this trip was filled with memories of the last time.

Another thought was on her mind: Mrs. Cordova is seriously ill, and they wanted to bring closure for the ailing family member.

When they arrived in Colorado Springs, Mrs. Peterson suggested renewing the search. This time the younger generations were able to pitch in, and with the aid of some computer savvy, posted a message on the Staten Island web site on the Internet.

The resulting communications led them to the police department and to the file buried in the bowels of police headquarters.

The notation in the missing persons file that Eleanor was "located" has angered Mrs. Cordova.

"Something happened to her," she said. "And they never told us."

Mrs. Peterson said that despite her handicap, Eleanor was able to

get around.

"She was very happy and affectionate with anyone offering her attention," Mrs. Nasert said. "She was very aggressive, she'd just come right up to you."

And while in 1969 such behavior did not seem dangerous, now it scares them.

"God knows who she met?" she said.

"She knew how to read and write on a sixth-grade level," Mrs. Peterson said. "She knew all our phone numbers and called us all the time. If she was out there, she would have called us."

Mrs. Cordova wonders if the girl was transferred to another institution as punishment for wandering off and prevented from communicating with her family.

"We put her there because my husband worked there (as a cook) and he could watch out for her," she said.

Now she wonders if that presence was enough.

Help from the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), the

office which currently keeps the records pertaining to the former state school, have not been forthcoming, Mrs. Cordova said.

"They told us her records were private, and we couldn't gain access to them without a court order," she said.

Sharon Haney, the records access officer at the Developmental Disabilities Service Office in Willowbrook acknowledged speaking with Mrs. Cordova's daughter, Vicki Osborne, and denying the family access to the records.

Debbie Rausch, a spokeswoman for OMRDD, said the family must provide proof of guardianship before the records will be opened to them.

In the meantime, all they can do is ask anyone who worked at Willowbrook in 1969 to try to recall the 22-year-old who was 5 foot, 9 inches tall, weighed 140 pounds, and had brown hair and blue eyes.

"Please let us know what happened," Mrs. Cordova said.

The family can be reached through the Advance.