

Search For Missing Teens Expanding

Spitzer, state clearinghouse joining renewed probe of 27-year-old mystery.

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State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer is checking into the 1973 disappearance of two missing Brooklyn teens following an appeal by friends and relatives who charge that New York City and Sullivan County police botched the case and misled them.

In addition, the head of a state missing children's agency is expected to meet with family members to discuss what steps could be taken to help solve the 27-year-old mystery.

These new developments come after a request in *The Jewish Week* by friends and family of Bonnie Bickwit, 15, and Mitchel Weiser, 16, Brooklyn high-schoolers who vanished on July 28, 1973 while hitchhiking from Camp Wel-Met in Narrowsburg to Watkins Glen to attend a rock festival. It is considered the oldest missing teens case in the United States.

Mitchel's older sister, Susan Liebegott of Gravesend, said Tuesday that an aide to Gov. George Pataki directed her to meet with Ken Buniak, supervisor for the New York State Miss-



Mitchel Weiser's sister Susan Liebegott, right, displays Mitchel's last birthday card during the tree-planting ceremony in honor of Weiser and Bonnie Bickwit last week at John Dewey H.S. Classmate Ellen Sperling looks on.

RICHARD LEVINE

But criminal justice experts warned that local police don't take kindly to what they consider interference by outside agencies.

"In many cases local jurisdictions refuse to cooperate," said one source who requested anonymity.

Technically the lead investigator on the case is Sullivan

County Sheriff's Department Lt. Anthony Suarez, who has come under criticism from family and friends for failing to perform basic detective work — like speaking with the original police investigator and re-interviewing witnesses.

Suarez could not be reached this week. A Sullivan County official said he had taken emergency time off.

Friends and family of Bonnie and Mitchel gathered last week at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn to plant a tree in their honor at a 25th anniversary reunion of Bonnie's graduating class — an event she never attended.

At the emotional reunion, friends who had not seen each other in years expressed shock that police in New York City and Sullivan County admitted in newspaper reports to losing crucial files and failing to pursue leads.

Brown noted that contrary to conventional wisdom, the attorney general in New York does not have jurisdiction over local and county police forces, district attorneys or even the state police.

He said the office acts as "the prosecuting arm of state government," going after Medicaid fraud or environmental crimes.

"We get referrals from various state agencies. We work on organized crime matters," he said. "But in terms of cops and robbers stuff, that's not us." □

ing and Exploited Children Clearinghouse, a unit of the Division of Criminal Justice Services.

"They said he [Buniak] would like to meet with me," Liebegott said.

Raye Bickwit, Bonnie's mother, welcomed the developments as "positive."

"I remember a time when I wanted the FBI to get involved and they refused, and referred me to New York State, which also did nothing," the Borough Park woman said.

Buniak declined to comment.

The MECC "actively assists law enforcement agencies and family members in searching for missing children," according to its Web site. Its assistance includes computer and database searches, methods unavailable until recently.

The unit also works with "law enforcement officers, medical examiners and coroners in attempting to identify living, dead persons and remains," according to the site. This includes "analyzing, transcribing and entering dental and other anatomical information" into state and national files.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Spitzer said, "We're going to contact the authorities and touch base with them to see what the status is.

"Our office is going to see whether we can offer any assistance," Scott Brown told *The Jewish Week*. He said investigators would proceed "very soon." Brown declined to specify what kind of help the office can provide.

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