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Missing girl has nation's attention

WATERVILLE -- One week has passed since 20-month-old Ayla Reynolds disappeared from her Violette Avenue home.

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WATERVILLE — One week has passed since 20-month-old Ayla Reynolds disappeared from her Violette Avenue home.

As the search for the toddler continues, Ayla's name and disappearance are well known across the country. Maine law enforcement officials — and those close to Ayla — continue to face a barrage of questions from national news outlets.

Outlets from the Sacramento Bee to the British tabloid Daily Mail have picked up the story. Relatives of Ayla have appeared on network and cable news to discuss the search and the circumstances surrounding the case.

Maine State Police spokesman Steve McCausland said media inquiries have come from all over the country but have been “manageable,” as the Waterville Police Department has been charged with disseminating information to reporters through email.

“Anytime there's a missing child, there's a lot of interest, as expected,” McCausland said.

The possibility that Ayla was abducted — one of many scenarios police aren't discounting — has rankled the public, said Michael Rocque, an adjunct instructor in the University of Maine's sociology department.

“There really can’t be a more vulnerable victim than a 20-month-old,” he said.

Rocque said Ayla’s young age and Waterville’s relative safety, compared to other places in the U.S., may have driven national media attention toward the case.

“The ones that get attention happen in middle-class areas where it is, ostensibly, safe,” Rocque said. “The community has sort of pressed the issue and that has made it into a news story, whereas in inner cities, there may not be a community to advocate for the victim.”

In many missing-child cases, a phenomenon known as “moral panic” can set in, according to James Cook, an assistant professor of social science at the University of Maine at Augusta. He describes that as an intensity of feeling within a population in response to an issue that appears to be a larger societal problem.

“When a missing child case comes up, it tends to spread,” Cook said. “We respond to those and tend to think of them as broader social phenomenons, even when they aren’t.”

Ayla was reported missing by DiPietro just before 9 a.m. Saturday, 10 to 12 hours after he said she was put to bed, according to police.

Police said Ayla was last seen wearing green one-piece pajamas with polka dots, with the words “Daddy’s Princess” on them. She is 2 feet, 9 inches tall and weighs about 30 pounds. Her arm is in a soft splint.

On Friday, Trista Reynolds, Ayla’s 23-year-old mother, staying in South Portland, appeared on NBC’s Today Show. She said 24-year-old Justin DiPietro, the child’s father, who reported her missing Dec. 17, is somewhat at fault.

Reynolds has said she and DiPietro have never been in a committed relationship.

“I trusted him to keep her safe,” Reynolds said on the national TV show, “and now she is missing and I don’t know where she is. I blame him right now. He did not protect her the way he was supposed to.”

Nancy Grace, the tough-talking former prosecutor with a self-titled HLN show, discussed Ayla’s case for two full episodes earlier this week, featuring interviews with family members. The show’s ratings soared earlier this year during the trial of Casey Anthony, the Florida mother acquitted of murdering her 2-year-old daughter, Caylee.

Much of Grace’s focus has been on DiPietro. While noting he hasn’t been identified as a suspect, she has called some of his actions into question. Waterville police have reported that when Ayla disappeared, she was wearing a soft splint on her arm from an accidental fall a few weeks ago.

On Dec. 19, Trista Reynolds also told Grace that DiPietro said Ayla’s broken arm came after he fell on

Ayla while holding her and walking up “two or three little steps.” She also said DiPietro waited “almost 24 hours to bring her to the emergency room.”

“I’m very, very concerned that daddy says he falls on the baby on the stairs and breaks her arm, and then daddy is the one when the baby goes missing,” Grace said in the same show.

Waterville is no stranger to high-profile cases that garner the media spotlight, according to McCausland. He said Ayla’s case is one of at least three media-intensive Waterville cases in the past decade or so on which local and state police have worked closely.

In 1996, manic depressive 37-year-old Mark Bechard burst into the convent and chapel of the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament on Silver Street, bludgeoning two elderly Catholic nuns to death with a statue of the Virgin Mary and maiming two other nuns.

In 2003, Colby College senior Dawn Rossignol, 21, was abducted from campus and killed. Her body was found off Rice Rips Road. In 2004, Edward Hackett, a previously convicted felon, was sentenced to life in prison for her murder.

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