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Missing girl's dad pleads for her safe return

Justin DiPietro said he's innocent and asked whoever has Ayla to 'do the right thing' and return her to safety.

BY [DOUG HARLOW](#) MORNING SENTINEL



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WATERVILLE — The father of Ayla Reynolds said Wednesday that he would never harm his daughter and implored whoever has the 20-month-old girl to bring her home safe.

In his second public statement in as many weeks, Justin DiPietro, 24, said he wanted to set the record straight regarding his daughter's disappearance nearly two weeks ago.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



Tara True of Winslow lights candles at the ever growing teddy bear shrine in front of missing 20-month-old Ayla Reynolds' 29 Violette Ave. residence in Waterville Wednesday. Reynolds has been missing for 11 days. *Michael Seamans/Morning Sentinel*





Justin DiPietro



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“I have to believe that Ayla is with somebody and I just want that person to find the courage to do the right thing and find a way to return her safely,” DiPietro said in a handwritten statement released Wednesday afternoon by the Waterville Police Department. “Even if that means dropping her off at a church or a hospital or some safe place.”

Ayla was last seen on the night of Dec. 16, sleeping in her father’s house at 29 Violette Ave. DiPietro reported her missing the next morning, 10 to 12 hours later. She was wearing green polka-dot pajamas and had a soft cast on her left arm.

A massive ground, air and water search began Dec. 17. Game wardens, state police, firefighters, civilian volunteers, the FBI and members of the Maine Association of Search and Rescue have participated.

On Wednesday, DiPietro thanked everyone who has been involved in the search for his daughter, including investigators and the community members who have offered a \$30,000 reward for her return.

DiPietro said he has not agreed to media interviews because he does not want to hinder the investigation.

“It is important that the public hear it from me personally that I have no idea what happened to Ayla and that I am not hiding,” he said.

In a written statement last week, DiPietro said, “I will not make accusations or insinuations towards anyone until the police have been able to prove who is responsible for this.”

Waterville Police Chief Joseph Massey has said that DiPietro and Ayla’s mother, Trista Reynolds, 23, who is living in the Portland area, have been cooperating in the investigation.

DiPietro said questions raised in the national media about bruises on the child and how she broke her arm are “simply ludicrous.”

“I would never want anyone to spend even a minute in my shoes,” he said. “No one should ever have to experience this. It has affected me in more ways than anyone can imagine. Please don’t give up or lose hope, because that is easy to do. Please be grateful for what you have. I know what I don’t have.”

The investigation into the toddler’s disappearance continued Wednesday. Massey said areas have been searched and searched again to ensure that no piece of evidence is overlooked.

As of Wednesday afternoon, 370 tips had come in concerning the whereabouts of Ayla, police said. Leads have come from as far away as California.

On Monday, investigators said they are confident that Ayla did not walk out of the house. Someone had to have been involved in taking her, Massey said.

The state Department of Health and Human Services turned Ayla over to DiPietro in October. Trista Reynolds filed court paperwork in Portland on Dec. 15 seeking sole custody of the child.

Deputy Police Chief Charles Rumsey said Wednesday that police know where Trista Reynolds was on the night of Dec. 16, when several people were at the home on Violette Avenue. He declined to share that information.

Rumsey also wouldn’t say whether another child was in the room with Ayla that night — as has been

reported in the national media — or whether forensic evidence, such as blood, was found in the house.

Authorities are not making affidavits filed in the case public, including those for permission to search the house, its garage and two vehicles that police seized from the driveway on Dec. 19.

“We’re very cautious in this case; we don’t put investigative details out there that could compromise a portion of this investigation,” Rumsey said.

For the second week in a row, the TV show “America’s Most Wanted” will air a segment on the case. At 9 p.m. Friday on the Lifetime channel, host John Walsh will address a national audience with an update on the investigation.

“It is extremely troubling that Ayla has been missing for almost two weeks and that someone is holding back an important nugget to help bring her home to her family,” Walsh said Wednesday in a prepared statement. He said last week’s show generated new leads for investigators.

The show’s producer, Michelle Sigona, said her staff decided the case is appropriate for “America’s Most Wanted.” Although the show’s main focus is hunting fugitives, it devotes time to missing-person cases, she said.

“It’s about engaging with an audience,” Sigona said. “It’s about pulling on the heartstrings of that person who knows something about the case and encouraging them to call us.”

The show maintains an anonymous tip line at (800) Crime-TV.

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