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Family without home during early investigation

WATERVILLE -- When the DiPietro family left their home the morning Ayla Reynolds was reported missing, they had no idea they wouldn't be back for two weeks.

BY BEN MCCANNA



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AYLA REYNOLDS CASE

WATERVILLE — When the DiPietro family left their home the morning Ayla Reynolds was reported missing, they had no idea they wouldn't be back for two weeks.

“I walked out of my house to go down to the station to give statements, and all of a sudden we were homeless on top of everything else,” recalled Phoebe DiPietro, the 21-month-old child's grandmother. “We walked out with the clothes on our back and weren't allowed in for 14 days.”

During that time, the house was the subject of a detailed investigation by police, and the surrounding neighborhoods were scoured for any sign of the missing toddler.

On Dec. 31, state police took down the police tape and returned the property to the DiPietros, but it wasn't much of a homecoming, she said.

“We walked out of a home and walked into a house,” she said.

DiPietro, 47, has owned 29 Violette Ave. since 1998. When Ayla was reported missing, DiPietro shared her home with son Justin DiPietro, 24, Ayla, daughter Elisha DiPietro, 23, and her infant daughter, whose name Phoebe DiPietro did not want made public.

During an interview Thursday with the Morning Sentinel, Phoebe and Justin DiPietro declined to discuss details about what happened Dec. 16, the night before Ayla was reported missing.

“I understand that the public feels they have the right to know,” she said. “I believe they will once Ayla is returned.

“But the bigger picture, and the most important thing in all of our minds, is that Ayla come home and we not hinder the investigation.”

She said they were withholding details because they were told by police that it’s important for investigators to keep some information away from the public, so they can easily recognize tips that have merit. If someone reports a tip that includes details that only police could know, then that tip is given the highest priority, she said.

She reiterated, however, that there wasn’t a party at the home, as some media outlets reported.

“There wasn’t a party here. It was just a normal day,” she said.

They also declined to discuss who they suspect may have taken Ayla.

“We gave those to the authorities,” she said.

Justin DiPietro said the family has cooperated with the investigation.

“They know everything as far as what we’re thinking,” he said. “Again, without getting into any specifics, everyone has their suspicions, as do we.”

Heartbreaking weeks

Police have released few details about that night.

At 10 p.m. Dec. 16, Justin DiPietro saw Ayla lying in her bed, then at 8:51 a.m. Dec. 17, he found her bed empty and he called 911, according to police.

Soon after, the family handed their home over to police.

“I signed over the house and any necessary paperwork that they asked us to sign,” Phoebe DiPietro said. “We signed everything they wanted.”

For the next two weeks, the DiPietros stayed with friends, whom she wouldn't name. She added that police knew where they were.

She said those weeks were heartbreaking, particularly on Christmas.

"It's been very hard," she said. "You're worried about your children. Your granddaughter is missing.

"How do you go through the motions to even comprehend the word Christmas?

"My son was in shambles — just crying and shaking — and there was nothing I could do to comfort him," she said. "You feel so helpless."

Contact from the outside world could be a mixed blessing, she said.

"The phone rings and you get jittery, because you're hoping they're calling because they found Ayla, but it could also be the media," she said. "It could be somebody calling to say they care for you and love you and offer to help."

Even if it's a friend calling with support, it's a difficult subject to talk about, she said. Few people can relate.

"You can't ask your friends, 'What did you do in this situation?'"

DiPietro's car was impounded for several days. His phone and computer were also held by police during the early days of the investigation.

Unhappy homecoming

On Dec. 31, Phoebe DiPietro was invited back to her home by police. Everything inside had changed, she said. Furniture was in disarray and covered in blue and black dust from investigators swabbing for fingerprints. Items that were typically found in the basement were upstairs, and vice versa.

"My house was in shambles," she recalled. "I don't even know how to describe that. I felt violated. Along with the fact that someone took my granddaughter from my home, (the police) came in and did what they did."

Police removed some items from the home, but she declined to provide details.

Nonetheless, she said the work was necessary.

Justin DiPietro said he agrees.

“They want to get my daughter home, and this house is just proof of the extent they will go to find her,” he said. “They don’t have to care about me, they don’t have to care about my mom. But, they care about my daughter, and I know that. They’re not holding anything back to find her. And, if they have to go through this house again, that’s OK.”

Since Ayla’s disappearance, the DiPietro family has endured countless inquiries from police, he said.

“Some of the techniques and tactics that they had to use, without getting into specifics, hasn’t been fun,” DiPietro said. “But, whether they’re popular with me is irrelevant. It’s about bringing my daughter home. Whether it be asking me the same question 25 times and you’ve got someone in your face telling you you’re a liar, the truth is the truth. It can’t be said enough. The truth is patient, and it will come out.”

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