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Intensity in Ayla Reynolds case boils over into assault, billboards with her photograph

Next



Matt Rourke | AP

Cars pass an electronic billboard with an image of missing Maine toddler Ayla Reynolds, Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2012, in Philadelphia. A New Hampshire-based group is putting up billboards to spread the word about the missing toddler from Waterville who was 20 months old when she was reported missing on Dec. 17.



By Christopher Cousins, BDN Staff
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Posted Feb. 07, 2012, at 1:05 p.m.

WATERVILLE, Maine — The tension surrounding the search for missing toddler Ayla Reynolds continued Monday with a violent altercation in Waterville that

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resulted in an assault summons against Lance DiPietro, who is Ayla's uncle.

Meanwhile, the effort to keep the search for Ayla in the public eye spread to Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where missing children organizations have [posted information about the missing girl on nine billboards](#).

Waterville Police Deputy Chief Charles Rumsey said Tuesday that police were called shortly after noon on Monday by 27-year-old Justin Linnell of Waterville. According to Rumsey, Linnell was walking along College Avenue at about 12:15 p.m. when Lance DiPietro rode by in a vehicle driven by his brother, Justin DiPietro, who is Ayla's father. Lance DiPietro later told police that Linnell shouted something at the DiPietros which caused Justin DiPietro to pull his vehicle over in a parking lot.

Lance DiPietro, 27, of Waterville, exited the vehicle with a miniature novelty baseball bat and began an argument with Linnell, according to Rumsey.

"The verbal altercation escalated into an assault," said Rumsey. Lance DiPietro allegedly threw the baseball bat to the ground and began fighting with Linnell. Linnell, who Rumsey said was knocked down and kicked in the face by Lance DiPietro, suffered a laceration on the back of his head and contusions on his face. Linnell refused medical attention at the scene but was later treated and released at an area hospital.

Linnell reported the incident to police and Waterville Patrol Officer Steven Brame responded. After speaking to Linnell, Brame interviewed both of the DiPietros and subsequently charged Lance DiPietro with assault. Lance DiPietro is scheduled to appear in Waterville District Court on April 17. Justin DiPietro was not charged and was not involved in the fight, said Rumsey.

Linnell is the father of the DiPietro's niece, Gabrielle, who Linnell fathered with Elisha DiPietro. Elisha, who is one of the three adults who police say was present at 29 Violette Avenue in Waterville on the night before Ayla was reported missing, is Justin and Lance's sister. Rumsey said the altercation stemmed from a "family dispute" over Gabrielle, though he wouldn't go into details.

"I don't think this involved Ayla," said Rumsey.

This is at least the third time police have been called to incidents involving the DiPietros in recent weeks. On Friday at about 11:15 p.m., police [responded to the Violette Avenue home](#) after the owner, Phoebe DiPietro — who is Justin, Lance and Elisha's mother — reported that someone had smashed windows from outside the house, sending glass flying into the home. No one was injured and Rumsey said Tuesday that no one has been charged in connection with that incident.

The home is where Justin DiPietro was staying when he reported Ayla missing on Dec. 17.

The DiPietros also called police on another day when they saw a bright light shining through their window, but it turned out to be a reporter taping a segment from the street.

Rumsey said patrols near the DiPietro home have been increased because of those incidents, which he said is normal procedure.

"We increase patrols whenever we have any kind of incident like that," said Rumsey, who added that the department has received calls from more than a dozen media organizations about the fight between Linnell and Lance DiPietro.

The intense spotlight on the search for Ayla has also attracted the attention of



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organizations called [LostNMissing, Inc.](#) and the [Laura Recovery Center](#), which are responsible for eight billboards in Philadelphia and one in New Jersey near New Meadowlands Stadium. Each of the billboards has Ayla's photograph, a notice about [\\$30,000 in reward money](#) that has been offered for information leading to her discovery, and phone numbers for people to call with information. Cynthia Caron, founder and president of New Hampshire-based LostNMissing, said Tuesday her organization is also distributing and posting fliers and posting information on social media sites in an attempt to generate leads in the search for Ayla.

"We started working on this right away, as soon as we heard that Ayla had disappeared," said Caron. "If she was abducted, she could be anywhere. We want to have those billboards up until the evidence strongly suggests otherwise."

The group is also working to install billboards in New Hampshire and Boston.

Police have said they don't believe Ayla was abducted and that they suspect the three adults in the Violette Avenue home on Dec. 16 and 17 — Justin and Elisha DiPietro and Courtney Roberts, who is DiPietro's girlfriend — have not told the whole truth about what happened that night. All three have maintained their innocence throughout the investigation. Police have also said they found the [then-20-month-old toddler's blood in the basement](#) of the home.

Caron said use of the billboards, which have digital screens that can be quickly changed, was donated by Steen Outdoor Advertising and Interstate Billboard Advertising. Caron said full rent on a billboard like that can cost tens of thousands of dollars per month. Caron's organization is also distributing information through posters and the Internet about 33-year-old [Jason Reil, a Brunswick man with schizophrenia who has been missing since late January](#).

"If anybody has any information at all, they need to call police, no matter how trivial it may seem," said Caron.

Anyone with information about the whereabouts of Reynolds or Reil is asked to call Maine State Police at 624-7076 or by dialing 911.

To view the billboard, [click here](#).

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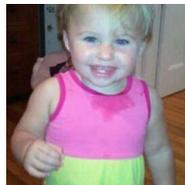
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