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Father, friends say it's possible; cops say no way

WINSLOW — When the paternal family of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds was displaced from their home by a two-week forensic investigation, a family in a neighboring town offered them food, clothing and a place to stay. And the family that supported the DiPietros then continues to support them now.

BY BEN MCCANNA



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Ayla Reynolds kidnapped?

WINSLOW — When the paternal family of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds was displaced from their home by a two-week forensic investigation, a family in a neighboring town offered them food, clothing and a place to stay.

And the family that supported the DiPietros then continues to support them now.

The Tudela family of Winslow has known Ayla's father, Justin DiPietro, since he was in grade school. They said they don't believe DiPietro is capable of hurting his daughter, they contend a kidnapping scenario is plausible and they said the public should keep an open mind.

Investigators say a kidnapping did not happen, but Darrell, Heidi and Derek Tudela and DiPietro said they believe Ayla is alive somewhere, and if public opinion grows to exclude that possibility, they believe an abductor could eventually hide the toddler in plain sight.

In a recent interview, the Tudelas and DiPietro also briefly spoke about the discovery of blood in the Waterville home from where Ayla disappeared, and a life insurance policy that the Tudela's son sold to DiPietro a few months ago.

'Nowhere to go'

On the night of Dec. 16, there were six people at 29 Violette Ave.: DiPietro and his daughter, Ayla; his sister, Elisha DiPietro, and her daughter; and his girlfriend, Courtney Roberts, and her son, according to police.

The next morning, DiPietro dialed 911 to report Ayla missing.

After police responded, the DiPietros and Roberts cooperated with the investigation by voluntarily turning over the home, computers, cellphones and all other possessions to police, DiPietro said. Police also impounded DiPietro's SUV and Roberts' car.

With only the clothes on their backs and no place to turn, DiPietro called one of his best friends, Derek Tudela, to ask for help.

Tudela then talked to his mother, Heidi Tudela.

"Derek called me up and said that Justin, his mom, his sister, Courtney and two babies had nowhere to go," she recalled. "They had no home. They couldn't take anything out of their home. They had nowhere to go.

"I said, 'Tell them to come stay with us.'"

For the next two weeks, the two families lived together in Winslow while investigators combed through the Violette Avenue home. Meanwhile, public perception was turning against the DiPietros, Heidi Tudela said.

"They were devastated. Their granddaughter, niece, daughter is missing. All they did wrong was have a child that was missing," she said.

The straight-face test

The Tudelas' home — a large, newly built neo-Victorian — sits on a partially wooded hilltop with sweeping views of the Kennebec River valley.

On a recent evening in February, husband and wife Darrell and Heidi Tudela, both 46, sat with their son Derek, 25, and friend Justin DiPietro, 25, in their spacious living room.

They said they wanted to address just one aspect of the ongoing investigation: They want people to keep an open mind.

They believe Ayla was kidnapped and she will eventually be found alive.

“I just want the public to keep their eyes open and not close the book on this,” DiPietro said. “This isn’t anywhere near over. ... There’s not going to be any closure until Ayla comes home.”

On Jan. 28, Department of Public Safety Spokesman Steve McCausland said investigators believe that Justin DiPietro, his sister Elisha and girlfriend Roberts aren’t telling police everything they know about Ayla’s disappearance. He added that investigators hadn’t found any evidence to support a kidnapping, that the scenario that someone snuck into a small house with three adults inside and took a baby doesn’t pass the “straight-face test.”

Heidi Tudela disagrees.

“When McCausland says it doesn’t pass a straight-face test, I guess I don’t understand that,” she said. “It is possible. It does happen.”

Tudela acknowledged that nighttime kidnappings within a home are rare, but cited Salt Lake City teenager Elizabeth Smart as one example.

“If you’re quiet enough,” she said. “If you’re someone who knows the house, for example, then you can be in and out of the house really fast.

“Everybody thinks that is so outrageous and crazy, and yet, the alternative to them is so much more believable — that he would harm this child and then talk other people into covering for him, two of which (Elisha DiPietro and Roberts) have babies and are very loving moms.”

Heidi Tudela, a daycare provider, added that young children don’t necessarily wake up when lifted from their beds.

“I work with babies all day long. I can pick up babies, carry them around in their sleep, and they do not wake up,” she said.

DiPietro said there are good reasons to believe Ayla is with someone, but wouldn’t elaborate.

“When the time is right, everything is going to come out. And regardless of what law enforcement is saying or what (Ayla’s mother) Trista (Reynolds) is saying, this really isn’t the time to be saying anything. And law enforcement, they can say ‘We don’t believe they’re telling the truth,’ but there’s a big difference between fact and thinking something.”

DiPietro said he hopes that the person who took his daughter will send a signal out to the public that she's alive. He also said he wishes the police could offer immunity to the kidnapper so Ayla can be returned.

McCausland said Monday that investigators stand by their original assessment.

"We looked at that scenario, and it doesn't hold water," he said of the potential for a kidnapping. "That some intruder came in — in silence — and no one heard a thing. It didn't happen."

Darrell Tudela said he believes DiPietro is telling the truth.

"Suffice it to say, Justin is still very confident that eventually police are going to get to the bottom of it and find Ayla," he said. "If whoever out there has her could help speed that process up, that would make thousands of people's lives better."

The discovery of blood

On the same day police announced their belief that a kidnapping was implausible, they also announced that blood had been discovered during the investigation of 29 Violette Ave. Later, McCausland said some of the samples were Ayla's blood, and the lab is analyzing other samples. He added the amount of blood attributed to Ayla was more than a small cut would produce.

DiPietro said he was shown the blood evidence, but he's not sure of the amount.

Heidi Tudela said she doesn't believe the blood is related to Ayla's disappearance, and said the announcement by police was premature.

"Unless you have evidence to prove that, I don't feel it's OK to use that to turn public perception, because you need the public to be out there looking for missing people. It's very important."

McCausland said Monday the decision by investigators to release the information was responsible.

"We felt it was important that the public understand some specifics of the investigation. We felt it was important that the public understand the magnitude of this investigation and that some of the blood was Ayla's," he said.

He wouldn't comment on whether more samples have been attributed to Ayla, but said investigators have made progress.

"It's a positive sign that the forensic work done by a committed team at the State Police Crime Laboratory is giving investigators new information almost on a daily basis, without getting into specifics."

The insurance policy

On Feb. 13, Ayla's maternal family released a statement that DiPietro bought a life insurance policy on

Ayla shortly after she moved in with him in October.

Derek Tudela said he sold DiPietro the policy.

“He didn’t ask for it, I approached him about it,” he said.

DiPietro agreed. He said he switched car insurance carriers shortly after moving back to Waterville. Tudela encouraged him to add the policy at that time. The premiums for both the car and life insurance policies are paid in one monthly bill.

Tudela said the additional insurance was inexpensive, and policies like Ayla’s are intended to be a gift for a child later in life, like a savings account.

“It’s very inexpensive. I told Justin it’s the same policy I have on my son, and it’s one of the best gifts you can give (Ayla),” he said. “I would do the same thing for any one of my friends, and I have.”

McCausland said investigators are aware of the policy, but wouldn’t comment further.

Ongoing support

The Tudelas said they have known DiPietro since he was a young child. DiPietro was a frequent visitor at the Tudela’s former house in Waterville, and one summer he joined the Tudelas during a family driving vacation to Virginia and back.

As children, DiPietro and Derek Tudela shared a paper route.

Watching their friend endure scrutiny from the police, media and the public has been difficult, the Tudelas said.

“I feel like I’m a pretty good judge of character,” Derek Tudela said. “I’ve known Justin for most of my life. He’s been one of my best friends. I know the type of person he is and the integrity he has. It irks me that they make him out to be a bad parent, and that he could have any involvement. I trust Justin with my child any day of the week.”

Heidi Tudela said DiPietro was always trustworthy.

“He was always honest with me. He was who he was, and he didn’t pretend to be somebody else. I’ve always told him, ever since he was little, I respected that,” she said.

Continuing their support for DiPietro has made them the target of criticism, but they won’t back down unless police can prove he was involved in any wrongdoing, she said.

“There’s nothing that says he has done something. It’s as simple as that,” she said. “And, if he were to be

proven guilty of something, I would still be OK with (having supported him), because it was still the right thing to do. Do I believe he is guilty? Absolutely not. But, I still would've been OK with what I did, because it's still the right way to go about it. You don't convict somebody without evidence."

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