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VIDEO

## 100 searchers look for missing Ayla Reynolds, find remains of Waterville man missing since 2004

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By Abigail Curtis, BDN Staff  
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**WATERVILLE, Maine** — About 100 searchers fanned out around Waterville Saturday looking for a sign of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds, who disappeared from her father's home on Dec. 17.

Searchers found no signs of Ayla, but Public Safety Department spokesman Steve McCausland said they did discover the remains of 53-year-old Steven Brandon of Waterville, who was reported missing in 2004, along Messalonskee Stream. Foul play is not suspected in his death.

Among those looking for Ayla was Jen Dorman of Down East Emergency Medical Institute of Orono, who was at the search headquarters at Thomas College on Saturday afternoon. She said it wasn't her first time searching for the little girl, whose second birthday is April 4.

"It's haunting," she said. "Every night you go to bed and you think about it. It keeps me up every night. We put blood and sweat and tears into this search. We'll do it until we bring her home — that's what we're here for."

Lt. Kevin Adam of the Maine Warden Service said that the spell of unseasonably warm weather is a primary reason why officials decided to launch another large-scale search for Ayla.

"It got rid of all that snow," he said outside the mobile command center that was parked at Thomas College in Waterville. "It's a perfect day to search, actually. It really worked out well for us."

He said that the effort began about 7 a.m. and involved both re-searching old

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areas and looking at new ones. Volunteers from the Maine Association of Search and Rescue, local fire departments, the Maine State Police, the Maine Warden Service and 10 canine teams came from all over the state to take part in the search.

“It’s a good turnout,” Adam said.

Around mid-morning, searchers working behind the Alford Youth Center on North Street found the skeletal remains of Brandon. His identification was found near the remains, according to McCausland.

Brandon apparently had disappeared from Winter Street in February 2004, which is across the Messalonskee Stream from where his remains were found. McCausland said officials notified his mother before releasing the information to the media. His remains will be taken to the Maine state medical examiner’s office, police said.

No further details about his disappearance were available Saturday.

McCausland called the finding “coincidental” to the search for Ayla, who was 20 months old when she was last seen the night of Dec. 16 at her father’s home in Waterville. She was reported missing the next morning when her father, Justin DiPietro, said he discovered her bed empty.

Ayla’s mother, Trista Reynolds, lives in Portland.

Police are treating her disappearance as a crime, but no one has been charged. An undisclosed amount of Ayla’s blood was found in the partially finished basement that DiPietro used as his bedroom, and police have said that DiPietro and two other adults in the home that night haven’t been totally forthcoming.

DiPietro has said he has no idea what happened to his daughter or who is responsible.

“It’s been frustrating to police since December,” McCausland said, adding that police communication with DiPietro, his sister and his girlfriend has now essentially stopped.

Law enforcement agents have received nearly 1,000 leads about her disappearance and followed every one, he said. So far, overtime costs related to her case have added up to more than \$100,000.

“We have an incredible amount of information that’s been gathered,” he said.

Even though the Saturday search didn’t turn up information about Ayla’s disappearance as volunteers combed through wooded terrain around Waterville, Oakland, Sidney, Norridgewock and Fairfield, it still was useful.

“We have now eliminated a great deal of Waterville,” McCausland said.

Among the searchers were Kelly Pontbriand of Gouldsboro with her border collie Tycho and Leslie Howe of Columbia with her German shepherd Frida, who are part of Maine Search and Rescue Dogs. The two- and four-legged searchers each wore blaze orange and carried GPS units with them as they prepared to investigate a wet, sparsely wooded 47-acre parcel near a residential neighborhood in Oakland.

“We want to help bring closure,” Pontbriand said. “Even if the outcome is not great, we’re still happy to go out and spend our time looking.”

Those words were echoed by Sharon Kenney of Corinth, who hit the ground with six other members of Maine Mounted Search and Rescue. They did not have their horses with them.



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“I was happy to be part of something that might bring closure to the family,” she said.

It was the first time some of her team members have searched on foot.

“It was very educational,” she said. “You get right down there in the thorns and the puckerbrush and the mud.”

Warden Rick LaFlamme said that he left Biddeford at 2:30 a.m. to head north to help coordinate the search. He showed the maps and satellite photographs that the grid and canine searchers were using to look for the missing toddler. Points of interest, where police had received tips about Ayla, were marked on the maps.

“Hopefully we’ll find something that will lead us to finding Ayla,” he said. “We’re just going to keep trying. We’re not going to give up, that’s for sure.”

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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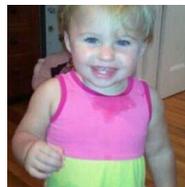


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