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Missing toddler generates online discussions

When his wife's granddaughter disappeared, Jeff Hanson felt he needed to do something constructive. So he created two websites aimed at drawing attention to Ayla Reynolds' case.

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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PORTLAND — When his wife's young granddaughter disappeared, Jeff Hanson felt helpless as the family anxiously awaited word from law enforcement authorities. He decided he needed to do something constructive as the investigation, now more than three months long, drew out.

So Hanson created the first of two websites aimed at drawing attention to Ayla Reynolds, the Maine toddler who disappeared in December from her father's home in Waterville.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



In this March 27, 2012 photo, Jeff Hanson displays a photo on his website about his missing step-granddaughter at his home in Portland, Maine. Hanson decided he needed to do something constructive as the investigation drew out, so he created the first of two websites aimed at drawing attention to Ayla Reynolds, the Maine toddler who disappeared on the night of Dec. 16 from her father's home in Waterville. The original website has received more than 1 million clicks, and there are now more than a dozen websites, blogs and Facebook pages dedicated to the case of the blond, blue-eyed youngster, helping to raise awareness along with billboards, posters and other conventional means of spreading the word about missing children. (AP Photo/Pat Wellenbach)



In this March 27, 2012 photo, Jeff Hanson wears a shirt for his missing step-granddaughter at his home in Portland, Maine. Hanson decided he needed to do something constructive as the investigation drew out, so he created the first of two websites aimed at drawing attention to Ayla Reynolds, the Maine toddler who disappeared on the night of Dec. 16 from her father's home in Waterville. The original website has received more than 1 million clicks, and there are now more than a dozen websites, blogs and Facebook pages dedicated to the case of the blond, blue-eyed youngster, helping to raise awareness along with billboards, posters and other conventional means of spreading the word about missing children. (AP Photo/Pat Wellenbach)





In this Tuesday, March 27, 2012 photo, a poster showing missing toddler, Ayla Reynolds, hangs in the back window of Jeff Hanson's truck at his home in Portland, Maine. (AP Photo/Pat Wellenbach) AP



In this Tuesday, March 27, 2012 photo, Jeff Hanson pauses while talking about his missing step-granddaughter, Ayla Reynolds, at his home in Portland, Maine. (AP Photo/Pat Wellenbach) AP



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“We have a new information age where there are many tools available for the public to either participate or inform themselves. The websites are part of that. In this case, it’s all positive because it keeps her name out there,” said Stephen McCausland of the Maine Public Safety Department.

Ayla, whose second birthday will be celebrated Wednesday, was 20 months old when she was last seen the night of Dec. 16. She was reported missing the following morning after her father, Justin DiPietro, said he

found her bed empty, prompting a massive search effort. Searchers lowered the level of several streams, and divers searched icy rivers, as well.

They've found no sign of her.

Investigators declared the disappearance a crime, disclosed that Ayla's blood was found in her father's bedroom and dismissed the possibility that Ayla was kidnapped from the small house where three adults were present.

Beyond that, investigators have been mum on details.

But there's plenty online, including discussions about the amount of blood found at the scene, a timeline leading to the toddler's disappearance and debates over investigative details and theories of what may have happened.

Hanson originally launched AylaReynolds.com to raise awareness, and it received more than 1 million hits. Little more than a week ago, he started a new website, answersforayala.com, to give the family a place to air its thoughts and to set the record straight on details. The website reported that DiPietro took out a life insurance policy on Ayla and details about blood evidence, information police have not confirmed.

But that's only the beginning. There's another blog, justiceforayla, that reported last week about a suspicious van seen near DiPietro's house, and another blog that analyzes public statements made by those involved in the case, aiming to ferret out the truth. A blog entitled JustStopTheLies aims to debunk false claims.

Hanson said he passes along anonymous tips he gets to police, and he hopes that they provide information police need to bring Ayla home. He tries not to let his mind entertain the possibility that something bad happened.

"I'm holding out for the best," Hanson said. "That's how we get by every day."

Ayla was placed in her father's care after her mother, Trista Reynolds, entered a substance abuse rehabilitation program in Lewiston, and the Reynolds family has questioned the care he provided for Ayla.

After being placed in his custody, Ayla broke her arm. DiPietro said she broke it when he fell on stairs while carrying Ayla and groceries. They say Ayla suffered bruises on one occasion that DiPietro blamed on a scuffle with another child and on another occasion suffered a pulled leg muscle that the father blamed on "horseplay."

He didn't return a message left on his cellphone.

While the investigation goes on, family members wait with growing frustration as they prepare to observe Ayla's second birthday with cake and balloons on Wednesday at Portland's Monument Square. The vigil is being sponsored by the family and nonprofit LostNMissing Inc.

The family is taking it day by day.

"It's not easy," said Ronald Reynolds, Ayla's grandfather. "It's not easy at all to go through every day, not knowing if she's OK, if she's being taken care of."

He said he's begun to fear the worst. But regardless of the outcome, the family needs to know what happened.

Trista Reynolds believes Justin DiPietro knows more than he's telling: "I hope that soon enough he decides it's been long enough and that he can't hide her forever. What's really on my mind on a daily basis, I'm wondering every day whether my daughter is dead or alive. That's what I want to know."

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