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Painful birthday approaches

Ayla Bell Reynolds was born April 4, 2010.

BY [BEN MCCANNA](#)



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Ayla Bell Reynolds was born April 4, 2010.

Twenty months later, she disappeared.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



FAMILY: Trista Reynolds, holding her son Raymond Fortier, with her mother Becca Hanson in Portland last week. Raymond turned 1 on Saturday. Reynolds is the mother of Ayla Reynolds, who was reported missing on Dec. 17. Ayla's second birthday is Wednesday. *Maine Sunday Telegram photo by John Ewing*



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As the massive search for the toddler grew from days to months, tens of thousands of people learned her name through the news. They have seen her in photographs and video clips.

At prayer vigils and on Internet comment boards, people express feelings of kinship for the lost toddler. She is like a daughter, or granddaughter, they say.

But few details of Ayla's life have appeared within the news reports. The public catches few glimpses of what she means to her immediate family and who she is.

As Ayla's second birthday approaches, her parents, Trista Reynolds and Justin DiPietro, and grandmothers, Becca Hanson and Phoebe DiPietro, described a happy, energetic toddler with a fondness

for music, dancing and “Dora the Explorer.”

But Reynolds and Hanson also said they prefer to keep some of their memories to themselves.

Awestruck

After more than 24 hours of labor, Ayla was delivered on Easter Sunday at Mercy Hospital in Portland. She weighed 5 pounds, 9 ounces and measured 17 inches. Hanson was in the delivery room and cut the umbilical cord. A nickname immediately popped into the grandmother’s mind.

“She was my Buggy,” she said. “Right after Trista and the midwife pulled her out, I looked at her, and she was my Buglet.”

As Reynolds held her baby for the first time, she was awestruck.

“I was excited, and happy, but I was also scared at the same time,” she recalled. “But as soon as I held her and looked into her eyes, it felt amazing. It was the best day of my life, just knowing that I was finally able to hold her and see her and love her.”

Reynolds said Ayla was an alert, bright-eyed baby. She also had a familiar face.

“The minute I looked at her, I looked at my mom and said, ‘She looks like Justin, Mama.’” Reynolds said.

A few months later, a paternity test would determine that Justin DiPietro was Ayla’s father.

Reynolds said the experience of being a new mom changed everything.

“Taking care of her for the first month was scary, because I didn’t know what kind of mom I would be, or what kind of baby she was going to be,” she said. “But she was an amazing baby — she never cried, only woke up a couple of times during the night.”

Reynolds said Ayla grew quickly and was always ahead of the curve for her age. She was able to lift her head on the day she was born, was able to roll over at two months and took her first steps at nine months.

“The doctors said she was always ahead of herself,” Reynolds said.

A deep bond

Hanson said Ayla was her shadow. They spent every day together and developed a deep bond, she said.

Hanson said she's not willing to share her memories with the public, but said her favorite moments were lying in bed together and playing with stuffed animals, particularly six toy puppies.

"That was our favorite thing to do," she said.

Hanson said some days she is optimistic that Ayla will return. Other days, she isn't so sure.

"Sometimes I sit on the couch and I can see her running through the house," she said. When the illusion ends, however, it's heartbreaking.

"Ayla is special to me," Hanson said. "I know grandparents aren't supposed to have one favorite grandchild, but she is."

Reynolds said Ayla's personality made people stop in their tracks and take notice. During their frequent walks throughout Portland, Ayla would start dancing whenever she heard music coming from passing cars.

"I would have people stop me on the side of the street and say, 'Your daughter is so amazing. She is so funny and so full of life.' People would literally honk at us."

Like her mother, Reynolds said she won't share other memories of Ayla.

"I've been keeping stories to myself," she said. "Maybe that's just me being greedy, but they're my memories, and I'm not ready to share them with everybody."

'I wanted to be there for her'

In July 2010, Justin DiPietro, was asked to take a paternity test. When the test confirmed he was the father, DiPietro was asked by Reynolds to sign away his parental rights.

DiPietro resisted. He didn't want Ayla to grow up without a father, like he had.

"I wanted to be there for her, because she deserved for me to be," he said.

At the time, Reynolds was in an established family with her fiancé, Raymond Fortier. Later that summer, however, Fortier was incarcerated at Downeast Correctional Facility in Machiasport for arson.

Fortier's imprisonment prompted DiPietro to take a more active role in his daughter's life, a role he wishes he had taken sooner, he said.

DiPietro met Ayla for the first time in the fall of 2010.

“It was a really humbling experience,” DiPietro said of his first encounter with Ayla. “She looked exactly like me. There was no denying that she was my child.”

Over the next year, DiPietro and Ayla went on a few outings together and started to get to know each other.

In October 2011, DiPietro’s role expanded further while Reynolds prepared to enter rehabilitation for alcohol abuse.

“That’s when it really hit me that I could be doing a lot more for my daughter than I am doing. And I had the opportunity to, so why wouldn’t I?” he said.

DiPietro left his apartment in Portland and moved into his mother’s home in Waterville.

DiPietro said Ayla was initially bashful in her new surroundings but grew more confident and outgoing as time went on.

Ayla and her father enjoyed going to the playground and being outside together, he said.

Phoebe DiPietro also said her granddaughter was timid at first, but she took a shine to story time.

“She loved books,” Phoebe DiPietro said. She said one of her favorite books was “Beaky’s Jungle.”

“It has colorful foil jungle animals, and a toucan took us around the jungle,” she said.

Dec. 17

A few months later, on the morning of Dec. 17, DiPietro called 911 to report Ayla missing.

DiPietro contends his daughter was abducted from the home during the night while she slept by herself in her own room. Police think her disappearance was not a kidnapping.

“I wish I could go back to that night. I wish I could have had her sleeping right next to me, but I can’t,” he said.

Reynolds said every day is a challenge.

“I wake up, I pray that today will be the day that I get the phone call I’m anxiously waiting for. When it

doesn't come in, I feel a lot worse," she said. "It's a nightmare. It's a never-ending nightmare."

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