



Portland



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VIDEO

Hope emerges as theme at Ayla Reynolds' birthday vigil

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PORTLAND, Maine — Trista Reynolds has had a lot of hard days since [the disappearance of her daughter](#), Ayla Reynolds, but Wednesday, the missing toddler's second birthday, was easily the worst so far.

"Today was the first day in three months that I didn't think I'd be able to pull myself out of bed," said Reynolds while gathering a car seat, a pacifier and a stroller for her son Raymond as they prepared to depart for a vigil for Ayla in Portland's Monument Square. "Then I looked at this little man walking around and I knew why I had to get out of bed."

The scene at the Reynolds household a couple of hours before the vigil was intense and emotional. Family members and supporters pinned buttons with the blond-haired girl's picture on them to each other and exchanged ribbons and bracelets.

Jeff Hanson, Ayla's step-grandfather, said the prospect of going out into public for the vigil weighed heavily on the family.

"In a way we wish we'd never organized this, but it's for Ayla," he said. "We'll do whatever it takes to bring her home."

Ten-year-old Chelsea Harmon, Ayla's cousin, bought Ayla a purple elephant with \$10 of her own money, and she yearned to put it in the little girl's hands.

"Purple, that's her favorite color," said Harmon, holding Ayla's brother Raymond. "We would have had some fun together today. I really miss her."

On the way to Monument Square, Trista rode with Betsy LaFond, a family friend who is so close that Trista calls her Aunt Betsy. Driving up Forest Avenue,

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LaFond stopped her vehicle and all the traffic behind it when she saw another car with "Bring Ayla home!" written on the rear window.

"Trista told me to stop," said LaFond later at the vigil. "We were screaming, 'This is Ayla's mom!' We didn't know them at all."

People who the Reynolds family don't know at all were in ample supply at the vigil, where more than 100 people turned out to celebrate the girl's birthday. With balloons, confetti, heaps of presents and a gigantic cake with Ayla's picture on it, it was a scene fit for a princess. Except the blond-haired, blue-eyed princess wasn't there and hasn't been seen since she was reported missing on Dec. 17 of last year.

"I've been crying all day," said Reynolds. "I just keep thinking, is Ayla having a good day today? Is she enjoying her birthday? Is she OK?"

At the vigil, throngs of people crowded around Reynolds, whose pockets would be overflowing if she had a dollar for every hug she gave and received. Family and supporters sold T-shirts, bracelets and buttons, the proceeds of which will be used to make more T-shirts, bracelets and buttons.

Ayla's situation looks grim — investigators [have ruled out the possibility that she was abducted](#) and have said that [they found her blood in her father's home](#), which is the last place she was known to be irrefutably alive — but most of the people close to her are holding out hope for her safe return.

Cynthia Caron, president of a New Hampshire-based organization called LostNMissing, said that hope is not as desperate as it may seem, even considering that police believe foul play was involved in Ayla's disappearance.

"One thing as president and founder of LostNMissing that I assure all of you, we quit guessing things," said Caron. "We've had many, many times with a missing loved one where everything appeared grim where it was almost certain that the person was not going to be found safely, and they were."

Among the vigil's attendees was Lorraine Ela of South Portland, the mother of 22-year-old Megan Waterman, [who was missing until her body was found](#) in January 2011 in Long Island, N.Y.

"I just wish Ayla was home," said Ela. "I know exactly what Trista is going through."

A woman who didn't want to identify herself said she drove two hours to attend the vigil and was thinking of her own children for most of the trip.

"There's a little girl missing who deserves justice and there's her mother right here," she said. "Ayla is close to everybody in Maine's hearts."

Ron Reynolds, Ayla's maternal grandfather, said he is among those who are still clinging to hope.

"Every day is very, very hard," he said. "I'm hoping this story has a happy ending. You've got to stay positive every day. You've got to keep going. You can't give up."

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