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Focus on Ayla, Justin DiPietro says

WATERVILLE -- The father of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds told those attending a candlelight vigil Thursday night that it's time to turn the focus back on his child.

BY BEN MCCANNA



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WATERVILLE — The father of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds told those attending a candlelight vigil Thursday night that it's time to turn the focus back on his child.

It was the sixth vigil held for Ayla, who has been missing since Dec. 17, and it marked the first time Justin DiPietro has spoken publicly since Jan. 2, when he appeared on NBC's "Today."

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



VIGIL: Ashley Pouliot, center, pins an Ayla Reynolds button to her T-shirt before a vigil for the missing toddler in Waterville on Thursday. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



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DiPietro began by thanking his family, friends and community members who attended. He acknowledged the tenor of public discourse after Ayla's disappearance has become divisive.

“In the past four months and two days, this has kind of gotten off track,” he said. “It’s been about me, or it’s been about (Ayla’s mother) Trista (Reynolds), when it should have been about Ayla.”

About 60 people attended the vigil, which was held at New Beginnings Church of God on Main Street. Ushers outside the church prevented TV news cameras and a Morning Sentinel photographer from entering the building, at the request of Ayla’s uncle, Lance DiPietro, the vigil’s organizer. A Morning Sentinel reporter was allowed inside on condition that he would observe the event and not ask Ayla’s family questions.

The Rev. Alan Imes set an early tone for the vigil by asking participants to set aside suspicion or anger.

“We don’t know all the ins and outs of things,” he said. “And we’re not here to figure it out. We’re just here to support. We’re here to be a blessing. We’re here to pray for her.”

More than 20 members of Ayla’s Angels, a local group that raises awareness and organizes small-scale searches for clues to the toddler’s whereabouts, attended the vigil. Before entering the church, one of the group’s organizers, Karen Francis, said she had mixed feelings about attending because she suspects Ayla’s paternal family is responsible for her disappearance.

Later, the group stood en masse at the front of the church and took turns speaking into the microphone.

“I just want to see this beautiful baby home,” Francis said. “Let’s bring her home. Let’s end this whole thing and just bring her home.”

DiPietro said he has been working with website This Little Light of Maine to raise awareness for his missing daughter.

“We now have 62 billboards that are up across the country. They’re in Washington, Oregon, California, Missouri, Mississippi, Georgia, Ohio and there’s still more to come,” he said.

He said efforts to find Ayla should be positive.

“That’s about all we can do right now, is stay positive,” he said. “Every day doesn’t get any easier for me. Just please, please keep your eyes open and don’t stop, and we will get her home.”

Ayla was reported missing from her Violette Avenue home by her father on the morning of Dec. 17. Police believe foul play was involved and they say the three adults who saw her last — father Justin DiPietro, his girlfriend, Courtney Roberts, and sister Elisha DiPietro — aren’t forthcoming with information.

All three attended Thursday’s vigil.

Earlier in the day, Department of Public Safety Spokesman Steve McCausland said that the investigation continues, but there are no updates.

Justin DiPietro contends Ayla was abducted. McCausland has said a kidnapping “did not happen.”

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