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# Planners of Ayla walk look to stem, avoid fighting

WATERVILLE — Organizers of the Eyes Open Walk for Baby Ayla hope to raise awareness about missing toddler Ayla Reynolds and unite members of an increasingly fractious community of supporters.

BY BEN MCCANNA



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WATERVILLE — Organizers of the Eyes Open Walk for Baby Ayla hope to raise awareness about missing toddler Ayla Reynolds and unite members of an increasingly fractious community of supporters.

“We want an open, public walk,” said co-organizer Ed Mea, of Albion. “We want it to be peaceful. We don’t want bickering.”

The four-mile walk through Waterville, starting at 11 a.m. Saturday, begins and ends at City Hall.

The walk is one of nearly 10 events in Maine that have taken place since Ayla’s disappearance on Dec. 17. Those events — multiple vigils, a luncheon and a birthday celebration — have been peaceful, but organizers of previous events say their efforts were often met with backlash from the public.

Ayla was reported missing by her father, Justin DiPietro, on Dec. 17. Police have not named suspects in her disappearance, but they have said DiPietro, his sister and girlfriend are withholding information.

DiPietro contends Ayla was kidnapped; police say there is no evidence to support his claim.

In the meantime, two staunchly divided camps have evolved within blogs, Facebook groups and comment boards. Some support Ayla's paternal family in Waterville. Some support Ayla's mother —

Trista Reynolds of Portland, who did not have custody of Ayla at the time of the disappearance.

While debate rages on the Internet, the people who have organized events in Ayla's name are sometimes swept into the fray, they said. The criticism can be so harsh that one of the organizers of Saturday's walk, Kass Snider, 19, of Oakland, declined to be interviewed by a reporter.

Waterville resident Lisa Howard knows firsthand the difficulty of organizing an event for Ayla.

"My name is mud right now. There are so many people talking crap about me it's not even funny," she said.

Howard helped organize a March 3 vigil for Ayla at City Hall. She said she has been the target of widespread criticism online ever since, much of it from strangers.

Howard was reached by phone Wednesday. At the time of the call, she and friend Karen Francis were searching areas of Webb Road and Drummond Road for clues to Ayla's whereabouts, she said.

Francis, who helped organize a March 31 lunch benefit in Fairfield, said she has also been criticized for her efforts.

"It's hard," she said of the criticism. "It was a lot of work, and you have to put up with people's disrespect."

Francis said she was criticized for everything from a misspelled word in an event announcement to accusations that she used benefit money inappropriately. She also said she's concerned that if she and Howard found signs of Ayla during their search, they'd be accused of causing her disappearance.

"But we're doing it, because we care," she said.

Laurie Bingham, whose Facebook page Ayla's Angels has more than 1,100 members, said she has endured online criticism since early March when she helped spread word to media outlets about a vigil. People accused her of trying to steal the media spotlight, she said.

"They say a lot when they're anonymous or behind the computer that they wouldn't say to your face," she said. "There's so much hatred going on and it makes me cry, because they're arguing and Ayla is getting lost in it. Focus on the child."

Many of Ayla's Angels have splintered away from the group and formed other groups on Facebook, one of

which has villified her, she said.

“I’m just doing what I would want people to do if my grandson was missing. I would want someone to focus on him, not argue,” she said. “My heart is in the right place — I care about that little girl. The fact that people are trashing me just goes along with it, I guess.”

Mea said he’s aware of the acrimony online, but he’s not concerned.

“If there’s any fallout, I can handle it,” he said.

Mea, a father of two daughters, said he has followed Ayla’s case closely and wants to help.

He said he has invited members of both sides of Ayla’s family and hopes they will attend and walk together in peace.

The walk’s route will take participants down Front Street, Appleton Street, Elm Street, Western Avenue, First Rangeway, Kennedy Memorial Drive, Silver Street and Main Street. A shorter route, of approximately three miles, will take walkers down the length of Cool Street rather than First Rangeway.

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