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Web reality show series to aid Ayla search

A reality-style webseries plans to spread awareness about missing toddler Ayla Reynolds and about 50 other missing children to a national audience later this summer. The race will also shine a light on Maine as a tourist destination.

BY BEN MCCANNA STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



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A reality-style webseries plans to spread awareness about missing toddler Ayla Reynolds and about 50 other missing children to a national audience later this summer. The race will also shine a light on Maine as a tourist destination.

The Fireball Run is an annual multistate road trip during which 40 teams of drivers compete in a scavenger hunt-style game that is broadcast live on the Internet, and is later edited into "webisodes." Each car features a decal of a missing child, and its driver hands out posters at each stop along the way, said production executive David Hickman.

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Ayla Reynolds AP

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This year, the Fireball Run will begin Sept. 21 in Independence, Ohio, and end Sept. 29 in Bangor. Two Mainers — reality TV celebrity Timber Tina Scheer and Maine Office of Tourism Director Carolann Ouellette — will represent the state and Ayla Reynolds, who was reported missing from her Waterville home Dec. 17, and has been the subject of more than seven months of intense searches and investigation.

Maine State Police Lt. Christopher Coleman said Tuesday there are no updates on the case.

“It’s a very active investigation. We continue to work it. I just got off the phone with someone who is working on it today, so it remains active, but there are no specific updates as far as what we’re gaining,” he said.

Scheer said Ayla’s disappearance touches her and makes her feel helpless.

“It’s so tragic,” she said. “I don’t think I would be able to live through it.”

Scheer has lived through a similar tragedy. In June 2005, Scheer’s only child died at age 16 in car crash, which coincided with national coverage of Natalee Holloway — the Alabama teenager who disappeared during a trip to Aruba.

“I used to sit on the couch wallowing in pain because I lost my son, and I used to look at the TV and think, ‘At least I know where he is,’” Scheer said.

Scheer is the owner and performer in the Great Maine Lumberjack Show in Trenton, where she puts on a nightly lumberjack demonstration for a paying audience. Nationally, she is known for a handful of network television appearances.

She was announcer for the annual Timber Sports Series on ESPN between 1989 and 2004. She also made one-time appearances on reality shows “MTV’s Real World” in 1996 and ABC’s “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” in 2011. In 2006, Scheer was a contestant in CBS’s “Survivor: Panama — Exile Island,” where she held the distinction of getting voted off the island first.

The contest doesn’t feature any prizes for winners other than the experience of seeing the country and the pride of victory, Scheer said. And, there’s the possibility that raising awareness about Ayla’s disappearance will help crack the ongoing case.

“If so, that’s winning,” she said.

Showcasing the state

Ouelette said she was invited to join the race by the Greater Bangor Convention & Visitors Bureau — a marketing group that successfully vied to serve as the endpoint for this year’s contest. Ouelette said several factors contributed to her decision to sign up, including the contest’s focus on missing children.

“Additionally, it gives us the opportunity to showcase the state, from Kittery to Bangor,” she said. “It’s also a unique opportunity for us to meet people on the ground in our key market areas, like New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.”

The contest will stop overnight in Ogunquit on Sept. 28.

According to the show’s website, the Fireball Run will feature professional auto racers Shea Holbrook and Tina Stull and other notables, but it isn’t a road race. Competitors must follow posted speed limits as they drive from city to city pursuing clues about their next destination.

“It’s kind of a life-sized trivia board game with exotic cars as the pieces and America as the game board,” Hickman said.

Cynthia Caron, founder of LostNMissing — a nonprofit organization that advocates for the families of missing persons, including Ayla Reynolds’ maternal family — said it’s OK to pair friendly competition with raising awareness for the missing.

“Any ways or means to get missing children’s posters out in the public is a good thing,” Caron said.

Hickman contends the annual competition, which is in its sixth year, has assisted in the recovery of 38 missing children, including two siblings who were found alive in Vancouver, Wash., during last year’s event in the southeast United States.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children did not respond to a reporter’s request for an interview to verify the producer’s claims. According to police reports at the Vancouver Police Department, the siblings were discovered through Internet searches that did not include information from the Fireball Run, Public Information Officer Kim Kapp said.

Kerrie Tripp, executive director of Greater Bangor Convention & Visitors Bureau, said producers of the Fireball Run contacted the city to express interest in concluding the competition in Bangor.

“We did our due diligence on this end,” Tripp said. “We really looked at who they are, what they do, what they hope to accomplish, and we felt it fit our mission as a community.”

Tripp said anyone can participate in the Fireball Run for a fee. The Maine team paid \$7,500. If each of this year’s teams pay the same amount, the production company will receive \$300,000. Food and

accommodations are provided free by hotels and eateries as promotional opportunities, Tripp said. In the case of Bangor, Hollywood Casino contributed lodging to the effort, she said.

Hickman said the Fireball Run began in 2007, and airs on www.fireballrun.com. Edited episodes from this year's live coverage will air on the website next year, but the show's finale will only be available on DVD or shown at film festivals. The times and dates are not yet available, Hickman said.

The company started a Facebook presence in October 2010 and posted its first status update in early 2011. The Facebook page has fewer than 1,000 followers as of Wednesday.

The company is located on a back lot at Universal Studios in Orlando, Fla., but is not owned by Universal.

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