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# Waterville, Portland events to mark first anniversary of Ayla Reynolds disappearance

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BY BEN MCCANNA



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Two upcoming events will mark the one-year anniversary of toddler Ayla Reynolds' disappearance, and each will attempt to find a bright spot in the midst of the unsolved investigation.

An event Saturday in Portland will serve as a gift drive for children affected by superstorm Sandy, then a Monday event in Waterville will spread holiday cheer through door-to-door caroling. Also, a car dealership in Waterville plans to hang a billboard with Ayla's photo from the side of its building.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



Ayla Reynolds Contributed photo



Trista Reynolds speaks to the press during a vigil in Castonguay Square in Waterville for her missing toddler, Ayla Reynolds, on Jan. 28. Staff file photo by Michael G. Seamans



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There are no new developments in the case, but Department of Public Safety spokesman Steve McCausland will recap the yearlong investigation for reporters Friday during a news conference in downtown Waterville.

The Shining Hope for Ayla event will be from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturday at Riverton Community Center, 1600 Forest Ave., Portland, and includes food, beverages, a silent auction, door prizes and a flying lantern release.

The event's organizers — Ayla's mother Trista Reynolds and president and founder of LostNMissing Cynthia Caron — ask that participants bring wrapped Christmas gifts that are appropriate for both girls and boys. Those gifts will be sent to Helping Hurricane Sandy's Children, a group that serves children from storm-affected areas in New York and New Jersey. The group isn't a registered nonprofit, Caron said, but comprises mothers who are "doing phenomenal work."

The organizers also are asking businesses and individuals to donate items such as gift baskets, gift certificates and homemade crafts to be used in a silent auction that will raise money for LostNMissing and National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, or VOAD — a nonprofit organization that is a resource for areas affected by natural disasters.

The proceeds will be split 50-50 between the two groups. LostNMissing, which advocates for families of missing persons, will use the money to print weather-resistant missing posters, travel expenses for runaways to return home and more.

The second event, Peace for Ayla, will feature caroling and a candlelit walk and begins at 6 p.m. Monday at the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, 36 Cool St. in Waterville. Participants will walk along Violette Avenue — the street where Ayla lived for about two months before she disappeared.

The event's organizers — Ashley Pouliot and Glenda Armandi — are members of Ayla's Angels, a Facebook group with more than 2,000 followers. The event is meant to raise awareness about the missing toddler, but it's also a way to spread holiday cheer, Pouliot said.

"We're going to go house to house up Violette Avenue and stop in little groups, just like a normal caroling event," Pouliot said.

Pouliot and Armandi are making booklets with lyrics to more than 15 Christmas songs.

Pouliot said the event is on Violette Avenue, but is not a protest.

"We're all going to be very peaceful, calm and collected. There's not going to be any ruffraff," she said.

Augusta attorney Steve Bourget, who represents members of Ayla's paternal family — aunt Elisha DiPietro and grandmother Phoebe DiPietro — said his clients welcome the event, but hope its tone will rejuvenate efforts to find Ayla and not serve as a memorial service.

"They're happy that the community still supports the search for Ayla," Bourget said. "The family prays

that the search for Ayla continues and concludes with her safe return.”

Someday this week, Ayla’s now-familiar face will appear on a large sign on Kennedy Memorial Drive in Waterville. Chris Gaunce, general manager of Central Maine Motors Chevrolet and Buick said the company will hang a 4-foot-by-8-foot billboard on its building, where it will be visible to motorists.

Gaunce was asked by LostNMissing to hang the sign, which had been hanging in the Boston area.

“With the one-year anniversary coming up, we just thought it was the right thing to do,” he said. “We can’t lose sight of the tragedy that occurred. We have to remember these things so we can find the answers and the justice that we need.”

Caron said signs and posters for Ayla are still necessary.

“Until clear-cut evidence proves that Ayla is no longer here, it is very important for people to recognize that this baby is missing and if you have any information on why, how, where or when, please come forward. Her family needs closure,” Caron said.

Ayla was reported missing on Dec. 17 by her father, Justin DiPietro. No one has been named as a suspect or a person of interest. DiPietro contends that Ayla was abducted. Police say a kidnapping did not happen and they believe the three adults who saw her last — her father, aunt Elisha DiPietro and Courtney Roberts — are withholding information in the case.

Investigators also believe Ayla is dead. State police are asking that anyone with information call them at 624-7076.

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