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Neighbors remember missing girl on her birthday

Neighbors and friends are remembering missing toddler Ayla Reynolds Thursday, what would have been her third birthday.

BY **AMY CALDER** STAFF WRITER



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WATERVILLE — Penny Rafuse thinks about Ayla Reynolds every day.

She remembers the missing child when she backs out of her Violette Avenue driveway in the morning and drives past Ayla's house.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



Penny Rafuse, left, Glenn Parkhurst and other residents of Violette Avenue in Waterville, where Ayla Reynolds lived, continue to keep the little girl in their thoughts. Ayla, whose third birthday would be Thursday, was reported missing in Dec. 2011. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



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She is reminded of Ayla, whose third birthday would be Thursday, every time she steps into her own dining room.

“I have a light in my dining room window,” Rafuse said at her house Wednesday. “It’s a Christmas light that I’ve never turned off since Dec. 17, 2011, when Ayla was reported missing.”

She said she will not turn the light off until those responsible are behind bars.

“I don’t know how these people can sleep at night.”

Rafuse lives five houses away from Ayla’s grandmother, Phoebe DiPietro, who lives at 29 Violette Ave. That is where then-20-month-old Ayla was reportedly last seen. She lived there with DiPietro; DiPietro’s son, Justin DiPietro, who is Ayla’s father; Justin’s sister Elisha DiPietro; and Elisha’s baby daughter.

The night Ayla reportedly disappeared, Justin DiPietro and his girlfriend, Courtney Roberts, were in the house, along with Roberts' son, Elisha DiPietro and her daughter. Justin DiPietro filed the missing-person report.

Police have said they think Ayla wasn't abducted from the house and that she is no longer alive.

No one has been charged in her disappearance.

"The case continues to be open and active, but there are no new developments," Steve McCausland, spokesman for the state Department of Public Safety, said Wednesday.

He added: "Any birthday of a child is a milestone, usually filled with joy and hope. Today is a sad reminder this is not the case in Waterville, and that on Ayla's third birthday we still do not have the complete story of what happened inside that Violette Avenue home from those who know what occurred. Ayla deserves better."

Meanwhile, Rafuse and other neighbors continue to keep Reynolds in their thoughts.

"It's good that people aren't allowing other people to forget about her, because if you forget about her, it'll never be solved," Rafuse said.

"She's supposed to be walking around and communicating and learning her independence and tying her shoestrings and kicking a ball in the street. It breaks my heart, even more so now that I have a grandson"

Remembering December 2011

A cold wind whipped down Violette Avenue on Wednesday, sending dust swirling in circles near Phoebe DiPietro's house.

A black car stood in the driveway, but no one answered the door, which was flanked on either side by stuffed garbage bags, Christmas lawn decorations and a child's orange snow shovel hanging from a mailbox.

A shrine of teddy bears and other stuffed animals that for many months grew on the front lawn is gone, but a 'No Trespassing' sign still hangs from a big tree near the street.

On Wednesday, the wind whacked away at the sign, making an eerie howling noise that alternated with the clang of a black metal wind chime perched near the house.

Across the street, Will and Kay Conway were sitting in their kitchen, reading the newspaper and remembering Ayla.

“It just doesn’t seem possible that it happened,” said Kay Conway, 82.

She and her husband, who is 84, have lived in their house for 55 years and spend part of every winter in Myrtle Beach. They recalled going there after Ayla was reported missing and being the focus of attention because they lived on Violette Avenue.

Everyone in Myrtle Beach knew about the Ayla Reynolds case, they said.

Kay Conway left the kitchen and returned with a photo album containing a picture of all the media trucks and cameras stationed outside Ayla’s house for several days after she disappeared.

Will Conway said he can’t help but think of her every time he looks out the window at the house or sees a little child about her age.

They wait for the day when the case will be solved.

“I can’t believe that somebody doesn’t know something,” said Kay Conway, a retired teacher.

Farther up the street, Glenn Parkhurst, 38, was in his basement, restoring stained-glass windows.

He said people talk less about Ayla these days, but they do not forget.

“Every time I go down the street, I go by the house and think, ‘Where is she?’” he said.

Parkhurst said the day Reynolds was reported missing, a friend who is a firefighter knocked on his door at 9:30 a.m. and told him what was happening.

For several nights after that, before Parkhurst and his fiancée went to bed, they brought a pot of coffee to state police officers stationed on Violette Avenue.

Parkhurst said he never imagined the case would remain unresolved more than a year later.

“I kind of thought it would be like an episode of ‘Columbo’ and somebody would step up and reveal a piece of information that police could use,” he said.

Both Rafuse and Parkhurst think police know what happened and are waiting for all the pieces to fall into place before charging someone.

Rafuse, who has lived on Violette Avenue for 27 years, said police did a phenomenal job scouring the neighborhood and beyond, searching nearby Messalonskee Stream and the Kennebec River.

“It’s almost surreal,” she said, reflecting. “It’s like she just vanished, and I so totally respect the law

enforcement agencies for what they did.”

Walking her dog, Holden, down Violette Avenue on Wednesday, Rafuse said her neighborhood is a safe one, where people are friendly and close-knit.

“If something bad happens, everybody rallies. It’s just one of the best streets in the world to bring a child up on.”

She said the Ayla’s disappearance deeply affected everyone.

“It beyond rocked the neighborhood,” she said.

Rafuse said she would be thinking of Ayla’s mother, Trista Reynolds, on the child’s birthday.

“I can’t imagine how she’s going to feel,” Rafuse said. “Ayla’s got a little brother that’s never going to know her.”

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