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Ayla Reynolds protest draws 35 to Waterville police station

Group demands criminal charges be filed against the last people to see Ayla.

BY **AMY CALDER** STAFF WRITER 

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WATERVILLE — More than two years after toddler Ayla Reynolds disappeared, the pain is still raw for her grandfather, Ronnie Reynolds Sr.

“Every day, it kills me — it really does,” he says. “Where is Ayla? The pain gets so unbelievable for me at times.”

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS



remember: Trista Reynolds, mother of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds, holds a picture of her daughter at the Colby Circle and College Avenue intersection in Waterville on Saturday. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



poster child: A poster with the image of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds was one of many signs on hand at a demonstration Saturday at the Waterville police station. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



Ayla Reynolds



unsolved: Protesters hold a large sign of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds during a protest about the unsolved case Saturday in Waterville. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



her daughter: Trista Reynolds, mother of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds, holds a picture of her daughter Saturday at the Colby Circle and College Avenue intersection in Waterville. The Push for Prosecution protest was organized to demand that authorities file charges in the case. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



protest: Mark Leighton, of Gardiner, wears a mask Saturday as he takes part in the Push for Prosecution protest in the Ayla Reynolds case at the police station in Waterville. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



speaking out: Trista Reynolds, mother of missing toddler Ayla, speaks to the news media Saturday outside the Waterville police station during a Push for Prosecution protest. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



awareness: Ann Carrillo, 37, of Waterville, holds a sign Saturday during a demonstration to raise awareness about the open missing-toddler case at the Waterville police station. *Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans*



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Reynolds, of Portland, was speaking Saturday outside the police station, where about 35 people had gathered to urge authorities to file criminal charges in the case.

“As her grandfather who loves her and misses her every day, as long as I’m alive, it will never go away until justice is done,” he said.

Ayla’s father, Justin DiPietro, reported the 20-month-old missing from their Violette Avenue home Dec. 17, 2011, saying he had seen her last when she went to bed the previous night. Investigators say they think DiPietro and the other adults in the house that night — his sister, Elisha DiPietro; and his then-girlfriend, Courtney Roberts — know more about her disappearance than they are saying. Maine State Police spokesman Steve McCausland has said DiPietro’s contention that Ayla was kidnapped “doesn’t pass the straight-face test.”

About 20 searches over two years have turned up no trace of her.

For Ronnie Reynolds Sr., who believes Ayla is no longer alive, the pain of loss is mixed with anger that she was taken from him and his family.

It also is mixed with a deep sadness that causes him to break down as he talks of his blond-haired, blue-eyed granddaughter.

“We can’t see her grow up,” he said. “We can’t see her graduate. We don’t get to see her go out on dates. We can’t tell her we love her.”

He arrived at Saturday’s event with his daughter, Trista Reynolds — Ayla’s mother — and Trista’s stepfather, Jeff Hanson.

Hanson and the Reynoldses said they did not organize the event but wanted to be there to thank and support those who turned out in the bitter cold to remind people that it has been two years and the case remains unsolved.

Trista Reynolds said when she starts to lose hope, she remembers the people who have never met Ayla but continue to fight for justice in the case.

“I think it’s absolutely amazing,” she said.

She said she is grateful for police and game wardens who have searched far and wide for her daughter and continue to investigate the case, but she is getting impatient.

“I do appreciate the work that they have done,” she said. “I just need to step their game up a little bit more.”

Hanson said Saturday’s event keeps Ayla’s case in the spotlight and is a reminder that time has dragged on.

“We’d like to see this move forward,” he said.

The event drew some people from far away. Heather Garczynski drove 13 hours from Erie, Pa., with her children and friends. They call themselves Justice Seekers and say they protest cases where justice has not yet been served.

Garczynski, 43, said she has a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and sociology and is attending graduate school for criminology. She maintains there is probable cause to file charges in Ayla’s disappearance.

“It baffles me that there’s so much probable cause in the case and nothing’s been done and people are

allowed to walk the streets without a care in the world and there's a little girl missing," Garczynski said.

Nancy Emery, 60, of Waterville, said she empathizes with Ayla's family, as her own daughter disappeared when she was 11 and was not found for two months. Her daughter now is 34.

Emery said she thinks those who were in the Violette Avenue home the night Ayla disappeared are culpable.

"They should at least be charged with endangering the welfare of a child," Emery said.

She added that the state also shares blame because Ayla was allowed to stay with people who did not keep her safe.

"DHHS (the state Department of Health and Human Services) should be held responsible for what they did," she said.

Conrad Armandi, 64, of Oakland, urged people not to forget Ayla, and to be patient, as the truth will be revealed in time. As a former deputy sheriff, Armandi said he believes authorities are being very careful before charging anyone.

"I think they're concerned about double-jeopardy," he said. "They want a solid case before they take it to trial."

In January 2012, members of Ayla's family said they were told by police that blood later confirmed to belong to Ayla was found in the basement of the home on Violette Avenue. Trista Reynolds said in September that police told her shortly after Ayla disappeared that blood was found in multiple locations in the home. Police have not commented on or confirmed that.

Those organizing Saturday's protest demanded that the DiPietros and Roberts and anyone else involved in her disappearance be charged and prosecuted.

They said they were not protesting against Waterville police, but held the event there because it is a public building and Ayla disappeared in Waterville. Police at one point Saturday came out to ask that some people move cars, but otherwise stayed behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, protesters held signs with messages including "Justice for Ayla" and "Someone Knows; Just Tell."

As a light snow fell, they stood along nearby College Avenue chanting, "No justice, no peace."

Trista Reynolds, holding a sign with a large photo of her daughter, yelled "Honk for Ayla."

Motorists whizzed by, beeping their horns and waving.

Ronnie Reynolds Sr. said he is proud of his daughter, calling her a good mother who is trying hard to raise her two young sons.

“I never, ever imagined that we would ever have to go through this,” he said.

Like Trista and Jeff Hanson, he says he is grateful for everything law enforcement officials have done and continue to do to solve the case.

“Every day I wait for that phone call from Steve McCausland — we stay in contact with him — saying someone has been charged. But still, nothing. I understand there’s still nothing, but it doesn’t make it easy for my family.”

An email sent Saturday afternoon to Justin DiPietro’s mother, Phoebe DiPietro, seeking comment, was not returned. She owns the house from which Ayla disappeared.

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