



NEWS

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Three years after Ayla's disappearance, Trista Reynolds struggles with questions, anger, grief

The mother and her family press for answers about the missing toddler, but authorities say it could take years to crack the case.

BY [AMY CALDER](#) STAFF WRITER 

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Trista Reynolds often finds herself obsessing about what may have happened to her daughter, Ayla Bell Reynolds.

She'll peer at faces of people on the streets as she drives through the city of Portland, searching for Ayla's father, for answers, for justice.

ADDITIONAL IMAGES



Trista Reynolds, mother of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds, poses on Friday, Dec. 12, 2014. *Portland Press Herald* photo by John Patriquin



A rally in support of Ayla Reynolds is held in Portland's Monument Square on her 2nd birthday, April 4, 2012. Ayla's mother, Trista Reynolds, right, and her friends listen to a song written for Ayla. *Portland Press Herald* file photo by John Ewing

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She wants to question Justin DiPietro and learn the truth. She also wants to see his face because Ayla looked so much like him.

“I think what I need is closure to move on with my life — to be able to sit down with my sons and talk about Ayla and say, ‘You had a sister who loved you.’”

Reynolds, 26, of Portland, remains angry that DiPietro, whom she believes to be responsible for the child's disappearance, hasn't been charged with any crimes in connection with the case since he reported Ayla

missing Dec. 17, 2011, from the Waterville home owned by his mother.

DiPietro maintains that Ayla was abducted during the night, but authorities have ruled out that scenario and say DiPietro, 28, and two other adults in the house that night aren't telling the whole story. Authorities say Ayla is likely dead.

Ayla was 20 months old when she disappeared from 29 Violette Ave., launching the largest criminal investigation in Maine's history. She would have turned 4 last April.

Three years after the toddler vanished from the house and sparked national headlines, Reynolds is still searching for signs that will tell her what happened to Ayla. Police have told Reynolds they continue to work on the case and while there are no significant developments, they are a little further ahead than they were three years ago, she said.

Reynolds has recently pushed the state attorney general's office to charge DiPietro; his sister, Elisha; and his then-girlfriend, Courtney Roberts, with child endangerment in connection with Ayla's disappearance. The three were the only adults in the Violette Avenue house when Ayla was reported missing, and police believe they haven't been forthcoming with information.

Frustrated that there's been no resolution in the case, Reynolds had wanted to see the trio face at least the lesser charge. "I want to see that man behind bars for the rest of his life," Reynolds said of DiPietro. "I want him charged right now, but I want him charged for more than a misdemeanor."

Reynolds said she is backing off from that effort since Maine State Police have convinced her that pursuing misdemeanor charges would make it difficult to bring more serious charges later on if they were to find any reason to. It could take several years to solve the case, Reynolds concedes, but she doesn't want it to become a cold case.

State police "were explaining to me that if they go and charge Justin for child endangerment, he would be charged with a misdemeanor and he'd only spend a week in jail and that is all of the jail time he'd serve," Reynolds said. "The way they are explaining it to me, if I wanted \$1,000 tomorrow, would I take it now if I wanted \$5,000 down the road?"

Multiple messages sent last week to Justin and Elisha DiPietro for comment were not returned. Attempts at reaching Roberts have never been successful.

Meanwhile, Reynolds is working part-time at Five Guys restaurant in South Portland. She's also caring for her two boys, Raymond, 3, and Anthony, 1, who have different fathers and are not related to DiPietro.

She continues to press for answers about Ayla, for herself and her children.

“Raymond asks for Ayla every day,” she said of her son, who was 9 months old when Ayla disappeared. “He wants to know where his sisty is. I don’t have answers. What do you say to a 3-year-old? There’s only so much you can tell him that he understands. I just feel so bad. I absolutely hate it. I hate all of it. I hate it that three years have passed. I never thought in a million years that I’d go on three years without seeing her face.”

GRIEVING GRANDPARENTS

Reynolds’ stepfather, Jeff Hanson, who maintains the website aylareynolds.com, is persistent in urging the state attorney general’s office to charge DiPietro and his sister, Elisha, and Roberts in the case.

Hanson says the effort becomes more urgent now because the statute of limitations for prosecuting lesser crimes associated with Ayla, such as endangering the welfare of a child, runs out on the third anniversary of her disappearance. He launched a petition drive at pressjustin.com to draw attention to the case and seek public support for prosecution rather than waiting for a “slam-dunk” case that may never materialize. Last week, the petition had 4,245 signatures.

Hanson says it has been nearly two years since state police showed Reynolds graphic evidence of why they believe Ayla died in the house.

He said the images are gruesome, showing Ayla’s blood spatters, saliva and vomit in Justin DiPietro’s bedroom, the living room and on Ayla’s doll and slippers.

“Yet the effort to bring Ayla home has stalled and with it, justice,” Hanson said in a prepared statement. State police “told us the prosecutor wants to find her body before prosecuting the case yet as far as we can tell, they haven’t conducted any searches for Ayla’s body in the past 13 months. They won’t find her body if they’re not looking.”

Like Reynolds, Hanson is angry that Roberts and Elisha DiPietro get to spend holidays with their children, yet Ayla’s maternal family does not get to spend them with Ayla — and there is no grave they can visit.

Reynolds’ father, Ron Reynolds, and his wife, Frankie Maines, are devastated by the loss of Ayla. They are always aware that they will never see her grow up, play, attend a prom or graduate, all the things grandparents should experience.

“I miss being a grandfather to Ayla,” Ron Reynolds said. “Her life got taken from her too early. I do miss Ayla so much. It’s so sad that she got taken from her family.”

He is haunted by the memories of a lot of things. Reynolds said he called the DiPietro home in Waterville on the day Ayla was reported missing and Justin’s mother, Phoebe DiPietro, answered the phone.

Reynolds asked where Ayla was.

“She said, ‘I don’t know — she’s missing,’” he recalled. “I said, ‘Where’s Justin?’ In her own words she told me, ‘Justin barricaded himself in the bathroom and police are trying to get him out.’ I’ll never forget it.”

An email sent Wednesday to Phoebe DiPietro seeking comment was not returned. Police would not comment on Reynold’s account of the events in the house that day.

The stress of Ayla’s case continues to take its toll. Ron Reynolds said that eight weeks ago he had a breakdown and had to be hospitalized.

“It’s been three years of hell,” he said. “It’s been three years of pain and sadness and crying and pleading and begging. I want people to know about the pain and the suffering that we have every day for our granddaughter — for Ayla. It hurts all of the time. I keep a lot of things to myself. The pain does kill me, every day, and that’s why I have to take medicine every day.”

Maines, who has leukemia, said that they pray for Ayla, who loved the color pink, every day.

“The Christmas tree this year will be all pink in honor of Ayla,” she said. “We have an all-pink Christmas tree and we have a special ornament for her and her brothers, and stockings by the fireplace. Her stocking, with her name on it, is snuggled right between her brothers’.”

Maines said she thinks that police must get aggressive in questioning those who were in the Waterville house when Ayla disappeared.

“I think the investigation needs to become more active and less nice,” Maines said. “I just want to see a more ongoing, more public, more aggressive, more active case because I think that the only thing that will make that (DiPietro) family crack is more pressure from police.”

COPING, NOT KNOWING

DiPietro had been caring for Ayla since October 2011, when Trista Reynolds went into a drug rehabilitation program.

On Dec. 15, two days before DiPietro reported Ayla missing, Reynolds filed for full custody of Ayla in Cumberland County District Court in Portland.

Reynolds has tried to press DiPietro, Elisha DiPietro and Roberts to tell her about Ayla’s last days — what she did and where she went — but they ignore her requests, she said.

“I always told Justin, every time we had any contact, that I am a forgiving person but I can’t forgive him for what he did,” Reynolds said. “But if he’d tell me what happened, I would accept it. He can’t even give me that much, to say, ‘Hey, I’m sorry, I should have been taking care of her.’ He hasn’t even said that. I can never forgive him but I could accept it if he’d be honest with me.”

Reynolds said she contacted Elisha DiPietro on Facebook a few weeks ago and told her it was not fair that she gets to watch her child, Gabriella, 3, grow up, while she does not have her daughter.

Gabriella was in the Violette Avenue home when Ayla disappeared.

“Being an aunt and being a mom, you would think she would want to speak for Ayla and say what happened because it’s the right thing to do,” Reynolds said. “She did not respond. I tried to ‘friend’ her and Courtney Roberts and her boyfriend on Facebook, but they did not respond.”

Reynolds said she imagines what occurred in the last minutes before Ayla vanished.

“There are days that I wonder, did she scream for me? I didn’t go anywhere without her. (DiPietro) just took her from me and changed who I am. I’m not happy anymore. Justin took something from me that is so important and so precious. He has literally ruined my whole life.”

Reynolds says she loves her sons, who give her a reason to live. Anthony is living temporarily with his father, Reynolds’ former partner, and she sees him a few times a week. Raymond lives with her. They have been staying with Ron Reynolds until they can find their own place.

Reynolds said her job keeps her busy and fills a void, but her focus is on her boys.

“That’s all I do. I do see a therapist every single week,” she said. “I’m angry all the time but as long as I’m with my boys, I do OK because I’ve got to stay focused on them. If I didn’t have them I’d hit rock bottom. Raymond is my rock. He has been through all of this with me from day one. If I lost Raymond, I literally would end up in a mental institution because I can’t do it without him.”

LAST CONTACT

For more than a year, Justin DiPietro had been paying \$82 a week in child support to Reynolds, she said. But that stopped in September after they spoke on the phone, she said.

“Me, him and Lance (DiPietro’s brother) made contact through Facebook. They actually called me one night, very inebriated. It was more like a screaming match rather than a conversation. All Lance kept saying to me was, ‘You need to tell me what you did with (Ayla).’”

Reynolds questions why they would blame her.

“I think it gets to them. They know these answers — they know these things. After the blowout, he stopped paying child support.”

The Department of Health and Human Services won't confirm the child support payments and whether a hearing — reported in the media — was recently held on the matter.

Reynolds has lingering suspicions about the timeline for Ayla's disappearance.

“Sometimes I wonder if she was missing before the 17th. Cadaver dogs couldn't sniff out her scent anywhere. If she was (at 29 Violette Ave.), they would have. So, where had she been?”

Reynolds said she called DiPietro Dec. 15, two days before Ayla was reported missing, and asked to speak to her, or to see her, but he wouldn't let her, saying Ayla was watching the movie “Home Alone.”

“Then he reported her missing on the 17th. I always found it odd that he wouldn't let me talk to her or see her. I was always asking to see her.”

The last time Reynolds saw Ayla was Nov. 21, 2011, she said. Sometime shortly after that, Ayla broke her left arm during what DiPietro later described as an accidental fall with him. At the time she disappeared, her arm was in a soft splint and sling.

The last time she talked to her daughter was Dec. 8.

DiPietro was to take Ayla to a WIC appointment and 18-month doctor's checkup on Dec. 12 and he was supposed to meet up with Reynolds so she could go to those appointments, she said.

“He canceled the 18-month checkup. He told me during that week that I would never see Ayla again. We were supposed to go Maine Medical in Portland. He called to cancel it and never took her. He said he didn't have gas to go to Portland from Waterville.”

Reynolds says she hasn't used drugs for three years — starting around the time she last saw Ayla.

EYES OPEN

Reynolds says she sees Ayla in the faces of her children, a constant reminder of her absence. Raymond, she said, accompanied Reynolds to doctors' appointments and other places with his sister.

“Raymond is in Head Start and with Anthony, it breaks my heart that he's never met her,” she said. “He looks a lot like her. Raymond and Anthony resemble Ayla so much that it breaks my heart every day because they don't get to be with their sister.”

The morning Ayla disappeared, Reynolds, who was on her way to Machiasport to visit her then-boyfriend at the Downeast Correctional Facility, detoured to Waterville when her stepmother called her with the news. She spent about two hours being questioned by Waterville police, then was sent home.

On Jan. 25, she attended a vigil in Waterville, where she talked to Justin DiPietro for the first time since their daughter disappeared.

She hasn't been to Waterville since. Reynolds said that she thinks about driving to the city to search for Ayla, but early in the investigation state police and the FBI told her to stay away because if her DNA — even a strand of hair — was found, she could be targeted as a suspect.

“I've always stayed out of Waterville for that reason,” she said.

She believes that what needs to be done to crack the case is having police call the DiPietros and Roberts into the police station and put the pressure on them to speak.

“I have no idea what they're (police) doing and what's going on in Ayla's case,” she said last week.

Reynolds asked that the public not forget Ayla and “keep their eyes open.”

“I do love her and I miss her and want her home. If I could have any Christmas present in the world, it would be to have her home.”

Amy Calder — 861-9247

Twitter: @AmyCalder17

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