



NEWS

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# Four years later, Ayla Reynolds case still 'open and active'

Mother Trista Reynolds and state police investigators still hope for results in the Waterville toddler's Dec. 17, 2011, disappearance as tips still arrive, one spurring searches over the summer.

BY [LAUREN ABBATE](#) STAFF WRITER AND [RACHEL OHM](#) STAFF WRITER

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Waterville and Winslow fire personnel and state game wardens search yards and outbuildings on Dec. 17, 2011, in the Violette Avenue neighborhood in Waterville for signs of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds. Staff file photo by David Leaming

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WATERVILLE — This summer, police conducted several small searches in central Maine based on a tip related to the disappearance of toddler Ayla Reynolds.

It's been four years since the 20-month-old was reported missing from the Violette Avenue home she shared with her father and her grandmother, but investigators don't consider it a cold case.

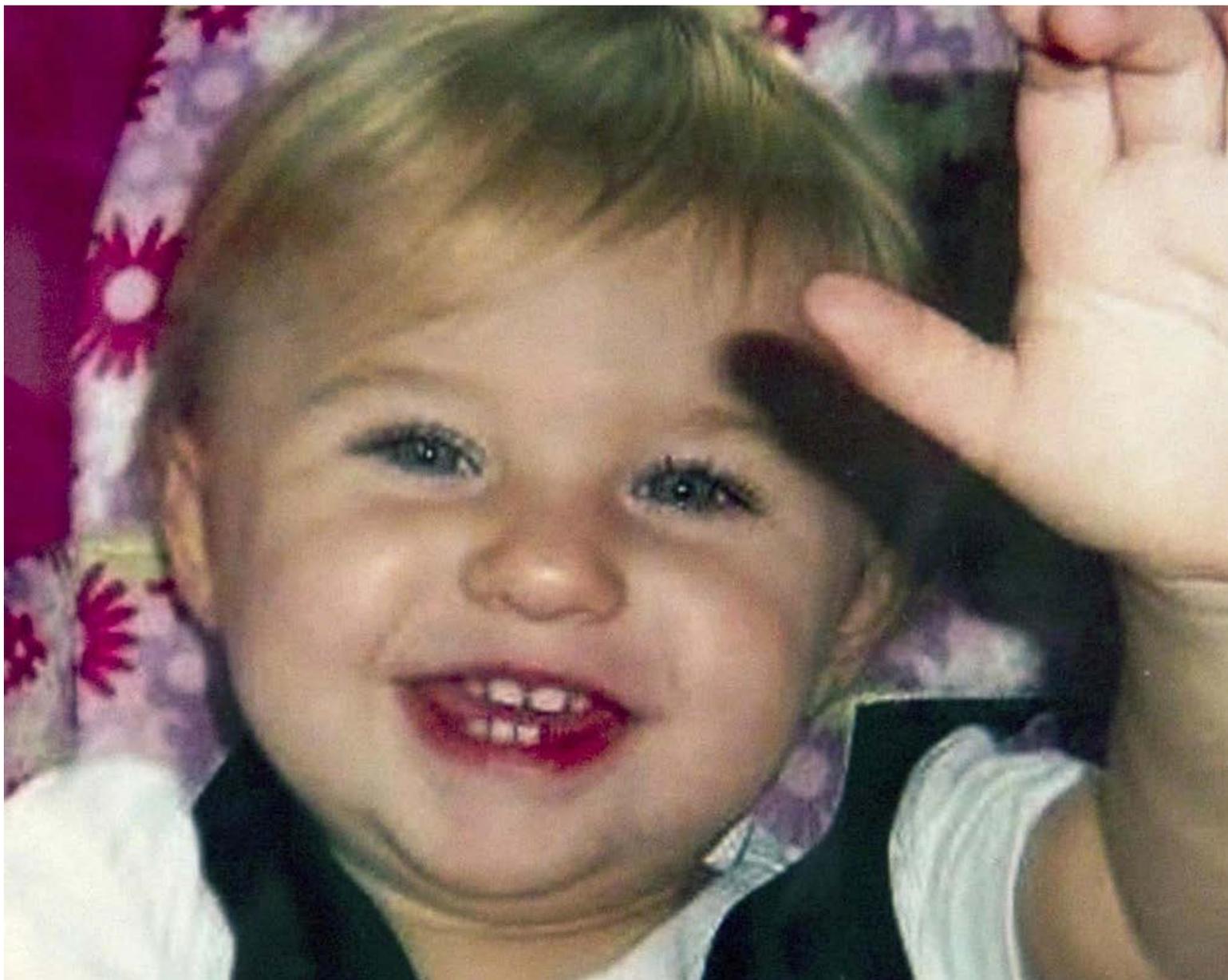
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Ayla Reynolds was 20 months old when she disappeared from her father's Waterville home on the night of Dec. 16-17, 2011. *Associated Press file photo / contributed by Trista Reynolds*



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Lt. Jeff Love, of the Maine State Police, said Friday the case is “open and active,” still under investigation, and tips continue to come in.

On Dec. 17, 2011, Ayla’s father, Justin DiPietro, [reported to Waterville police](#) that Ayla was missing from the home at 29 Violette Ave.

That report spurred what state police have said is the largest criminal investigation in state history, drawing hundreds of police officers from around the state to Waterville in the immediate aftermath of her disappearance.

Dozens of searches have been conducted — both on the ground and in the waterways that surround Waterville — and although police have said they believe Ayla is no longer alive, they have not given up on searching for her.

Love, who was the lead investigator on the case and now supervises the investigative team, wouldn't give details on this summer's searches but said they were spurred by a tip.

He said the detectives assigned to the case review the tips as they continue to come, following up on them to determine whether they are credible and whether they can apply to previous investigative work done over the last four years.

Those searches were the first in the case since [Oct. 23, 2013, when police searched](#) the woods off of Hussey Hill Road in Oakland. That one turned up only animal bones.

Love declined to comment on the nature of the searches this summer, or the tip that spurred them, and he also didn't say whether the searches produced any new leads or evidence.

## **NO ANSWERS**

Four years later, the Reynolds family still has no answers.

Ayla's mother, Trista Reynolds, said she has not talked to police since November, when she heard that DiPietro had been [arrested for operating under the influence](#) in the Lincoln County town of Newcastle.

"I asked the same questions I always ask. 'Is there anything new? Any new leads? Is there anything you can tell me?'" said Reynolds, 27, of Portland.

"I get the same answers I've gotten pretty much for the last four years, that there are still leads coming in, they're still working on it, but nothing that has gotten them to actually solve her case yet."

"This year marks a lot," she said. "It's not just the four-year anniversary, but it's also been four years since we had a Halloween with her, four years since we had a Thanksgiving with her and now it also marks five years that we don't share a Christmas with her. It's really rough."

Reynolds said she and her family, including her two sons, Raymond — who is 4 and still asks for his "sissy" — and Anthony, 2, will quietly acknowledge the anniversary of Ayla's disappearance this week, though a rally in her memory is being planned around the time of Ayla's sixth birthday in April.

Reynolds also laments that this is the year she would have started kindergarten and says she misses the chance to watch her daughter grow up.

“Next year for her five-year anniversary, if we have no answers and we’re in the same place we’ve been for the last four years, we’ll do something big,” Reynolds said.

Reynolds, who in the past has organized walks and rallies in memory of her daughter, told the Morning Sentinel in March that she was trying to focus on raising her two young sons and protect them from the public eye.

“I’m just doing something with my sons and my family,” she [said in March](#) shortly before Ayla’s fifth birthday on April 4. “I’m not doing anything involving a bunch of people. It has been a rough couple of weeks. I’m just kind of needing my space this year.”

## **ONLY SILENCE**

The investigative team has heard only silence from DiPietro and the others who were at the Violette Avenue home the night of Dec. 16, 2011, and the next morning. Ayla reportedly was seen last by her aunt, Elisha DiPietro, around 10 p.m. when she checked on the sleeping toddler in her bedroom.

“There has been no follow-up communication. They have not called us, or have we reached out to them,” Love said.

At the time of DiPietro’s arrest last month, the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office listed him as living in Waterville.

DiPietro could not be reached for comment last week. His mother, Phoebe DiPietro, who owns the house and was not home the night Ayla was seen last, also did not respond to a request for comment.

Reynolds said she has not spoken to DiPietro in three years and was not sure where he was living or how he was doing.

At the time of Ayla’s disappearance, DiPietro told police that he believed someone had abducted his daughter from the house and that he awoke on the morning of Dec. 17 to find her missing. Police, however, believe it is [highly unlikely that Ayla is alive](#) and do not believe she was kidnapped.

DiPietro [told the Morning Sentinel in April 2012](#) that he was doing all he could to “stay positive.”

“Every day doesn’t get any easier for me,” he said at the time. “Just please, please keep your eyes open and don’t stop, and we will get her home.”

Reynolds meanwhile has maintained that DiPietro; his sister, Elisha DiPietro; and his then-girlfriend, Courtney Roberts, are responsible for Ayla’s disappearance and has pushed for the Office of the Maine

Attorney General to bring charges against them.

## A COLD CASE?

In April, Reynolds was among advocates calling for the [formation of the state's new cold case squad](#).

“I don't want to be one of those moms 30 years from now not knowing what happened,” Reynolds said at a State House news conference. “With all the help of every parent that has a missing child, we should try and get it funded so we can bring our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews home.”

She said Friday that police have not yet marked Ayla's case as a cold case and she was not sure whether it ever would be.

“Whoever solves her case, I don't really care. I just want it solved,” Reynolds said. “I want answers. I want people behind bars and I want to be able to bring her home and give her the proper burial that she deserves, because I've gone four years not knowing. I've gone four years not hearing her voice or watching her grow up.”

There are no clear rules for what defines a cold case, and while Ayla's case has not been labeled as such, it is an example of an unsolved case in Maine that could be looked at by the new cold case squad, Love said. There are more than [70 unsolved homicides](#) in Maine.

Funding for the new squad was approved in June, but it has yet to be fully formed, with the appointment of two additional police detectives coming just last week. Love, who was named to oversee the squad last month, will be joined by Detective Jay Pelletier, who works with the State Police Major Crimes Unit North in Bangor, and Detective Brian Jacques, who works with the Major Crimes Unit Central office at the Somerset County District Attorney's Office.

The squad also will include an assistant attorney general from the Office of the Maine Attorney General, a forensic chemist and a victim's advocate.

Patrick Day, of Rockland, a volunteer who helped write the legislation making the squad possible, said that while Ayla's case has not been deemed a cold case officially, it is an example of a case that could benefit from the review of the new cold case squad.

“A lot of these missing people have been missing for 10, 20 or 30 years,” Day said. “As is the case with a lot of missing persons, no one believes Ayla Reynolds is alive. No one. So even though she's listed as a missing person, she certainly also should be considered an unsolved homicide.”

Day also is involved in planning the April rally for Ayla, which he said was inspired after last summer's discovery of the body of a 2-year-old child in Boston area, Bella Bond. Investigators looked at Ayla's case

and cases of other missing children before it was determined that the body, found on a Boston beach, was Bella, bringing other missing-children cases back into the spotlight.

The rally is planned for early April — around the time of Ayla’s birthday on April 4 — and will be in Waterville.

“I think we need to bring some attention back to Ayla Reynolds and her story,” Day said. “I think even though she’s listed as missing, the Maine State Police don’t believe she left that house alive, and we want to bring attention to that.”

Reynolds, too, said she no longer believes her daughter is alive, though she still has hope that police will find her. “My one Christmas wish would be for all three of my children to be able to sit down and open presents together and enjoy Christmas, but that doesn’t get to happen because there are still people walking the street not giving answers and not telling police what really happened,” she said.

She wants to bury Ayla someplace where she can sit and talk with her and feel as though they are together.

“I didn’t think I’d be making it to four years, and I sure didn’t think I’d be on five years not sharing a Christmas with her.”

*Rachel Ohm — 612-2368*

*[email protected]*

*Twitter: @rachel\_ohm*

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