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Mid-Maine

Mother of missing toddler Ayla Reynolds says she seeks justice, not money, in probate case

By Christopher Cousins, BDN Staff • September 25, 2017 3:59 pm

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There's little room for hope in Trista Reynolds' life when it comes to finding her missing daughter, Ayla.

The girl hasn't been seen since she disappeared while staying with her father in Waterville on Dec. 17, 2011. Nobody harbors much hope that the girl who would now be seven years old is alive. Not even Trista, who said she hit an emotional "rock bottom" a year ago, so she joined the New Life Church in Biddeford.

“I’ve come to learn a lot by going to church,” said Reynolds, speaking with the Bangor Daily News Monday in Portland. “I have hope, but I don’t have hope of her coming home. I don’t have hope of finding her body but I have hope of getting her justice,” said Reynolds, 29. “I have hope of getting the people prosecuted for what they have done.”

In a nearby probate courthouse, a judge is considering [whether to declare Ayla legally dead](#). The Ayla Reynolds case, which spurred one of the largest missing persons investigations in state history, remains unsolved and there have been no arrests. Investigators have said they believe her disappearance was due to foul play and that Ayla’s father, Justin DiPietro, and two other adults who were with Ayla when she went missing, know more than they have told police.

Among Trista’s hopes is that the death declaration will bring her and her family emotional closure and that a wrongful death suit against DiPietro and others could bring legal closure. Reynolds said it is not money she is after, but justice.

“She’s my daughter. She’s a human being. She’s a little girl. She’s a life,” said Reynolds.

Reynolds said her life, in some ways, is better than it was before Ayla disappeared. The drug addiction that hospitalized her at the time of Ayla’s disappearance is over; she says she’s been sober for six years. Her life revolves around caring for two sons — Anthony, 4, and Raymond, 6. She has a new understanding about how to grieve, for which she credits the church.

“I had a lot of my own problems,” she said. “I was really angry with God and I felt like He was the one to blame. ... I’ve come to learn that it’s not so much Him to be angry with, so I’m not. Believing Ayla is in heaven with Him kind of makes it a little bit easier.”

Not so easy is when her sons ask about Ayla, especially six-year-old Raymond.

“He told me yesterday he misses her and wants her to come home,” said Reynolds. “That’s what gets rough.”

Trista said she keeps all of Ayla’s belongings — books, toys, clothing, facecloths, stuffed animals, bedding — stored in plastic totes. She can’t bear to let them go. She also can’t bear to look through them most of the time, because of the memories they conjure.

“I’ve thought about making a quilt out of all of her clothes, but I don’t want to cut anything,” said Reynolds. “I carry the first drawing she ever made me in my wallet. That’s the only thing I keep with me.”

The scribbled drawing, made by Ayla with the help of her grandmother in October of 2011 when Reynolds was hospitalized, is on both sides of a worn slip of paper that’s tattered and ripping along the folds. In one corner is Ayla’s name, written with toddler hands with the obvious help of an adult. Across the top is a message that still speaks to Trista, albeit now across years and from some unknown location where Ayla’s body is stashed. It says “Mommy I love you and I miss you.”

“It hasn’t left my wallet,” said Reynolds, carefully unfolding and spreading the fragile page on a knee. “It never, never will.”

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