

Playland melee charges set for dismissal in deal

RYE — Dalia Nazzal is glad that a dark chapter of her life is finally over.

Almost five months after a full-blown melee at Playland Amusement Park, the Spring Valley resident, an 18-year-old freshman at City College in Manhattan, accepted an offer from the government that will wipe out a disorderly-conduct charge lodged against her.

She and her mother, Noor Jaber, were two of 14 Muslim-Americans who accepted adjournments in contemplation of dismissal in Rye City Court on Tuesday. The settlement allows them to maintain their innocence and have the charges against them dismissed if they're not arrested again before March 20. The 15th defendant in the case was home sick in Brooklyn but is expected to get the same deal, said their lawyer, Lamis Deek.

The group was at Playland on Aug. 30 as part of a Ramadan event sponsored by the Muslim American Society of New York when there was a dispute about the park's safety policy prohibiting headgear — including traditional Muslim women's head scarves, known as hijabs — on certain rides.

Nazzal said the incident started as a "miscommunication" and ended in an awful

confrontation, with police and park rangers arresting people indiscriminately and even dragging her mother from a paddy wagon.

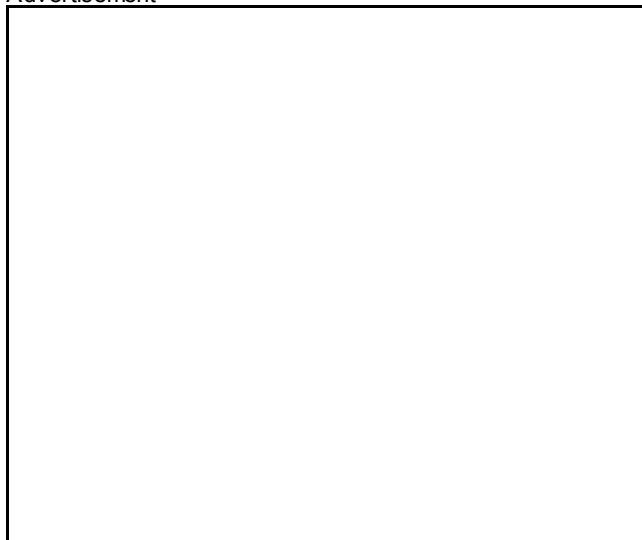
"They just attacked and didn't give anyone a chance to respond," Nazzal said, calling the authorities' response unprofessional.

"This was a very hard time," said Khallel Nazzal, Dalia's father and Noor's husband. "All the members of the community are very upset about what has happened. What was really upsetting ... was being treated in such an inhumane manner."

The county's public safety commissioner, George Longworth, defended the police response at the time, saying the officers had shown "restraint and professionalism" when faced with an increasingly unruly crowd.

Deek said Tuesday that the key to resolving the case was that none of her clients would have to plead guilty in order to have the charges dropped.

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"It's a good offer," said Deek, who specializes in civil rights cases and injustices against Muslims. She said the defendants plan to file federal civil rights lawsuits against the county as their next step.

Deek said most adjournments in contemplation of dismissal have a six-month window where the defendant has to stay out of trouble, so the fact that her clients got just two months "speaks volumes" about their innocence. Deek also thanked the assistant district attorney assigned to Rye, Valerie Livingston.

"My clients had a bad experience with the (police) officers, but a good experience with the criminal justice system," Deek said.

She called the scene at Playland "pure chaos" and the arrests "abusive."

Inside the courtroom, the proceeding was relatively casual. Each suspect was called up, testified that he or she had no prior arrest record, and agreed to Livingston's terms.

Two of the defendants initially had been charged with felony assault. Livingston downgraded those charges to a harassment violation to allow for the deal.

Judge Joseph Latwin wished them all luck and thanked the defendants, many of whom live in Brooklyn, for coming a long way for the court appearance.

Nazzal, who was 17 at the time of the melee, said she's glad it's now behind her — at least in criminal court.

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