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Teen talks of role in Playland melee over head scarves

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RYE, N.Y. — Ola Salem says it was her refusal to take off her head scarf to go on a ride that sparked Tuesday's fracas at Playland Amusement Park.

"I started the whole thing," the 17-year-old Brooklyn resident said Wednesday.

Salem and her family were among 3,000 Muslims who were participating in a promotional day at Playland to celebrate the end of Ramadan when a melee broke out among 30 to 40 people upset at enforcement of a longstanding rule.

Salem's father and 14 other people were arrested after tempers flared when Salem was told by a ride attendant she would have to remove her "headgear" — her hijab — if she wanted to get on a fast-moving ride.

"This has nothing to do with headgear," Salem recalled saying to the ride attendant. "This is my religion."

Salem took her complaint to a manager, who supported the attendant's position, telling her that the scarf could get caught in a wheel.

"Muslims wouldn't allow it to get caught," Salem said Wednesday. "It's worn low and tight."

Salem began telling other Muslim women what had happened, and, as word spread, anger built. Attendees said they had not known beforehand about the park's rules — ultimately leading to the melee, a massive police response and the arrests of 15 park-goers, two were charged with felony assault and most others with disorderly conduct.

Email correspondence shows Playland officials were clear about the ban on hijabs and other "headgear" to leaders of the Muslim American Society of New York, which organized the outing.

The string of emails obtained by The Journal News between Playland event coordinator Adam Harvey and MAS New York president Hatem Gawaly included questions about the head scarves women wear.

"I need to get more details please about whether a burka/hijab constitutes as a head gear," Gawaly wrote to Harvey on July 19. "There will be a lot of commotion about this."

Harvey responded on July 23: "The head gear RULES are there for safety and they will not change them even for a big group. I am sorry about this."

The next day, Gawaly wrote back: "OK, thanks. Will have to deal with it later."

When MAS released its flier advertising a special "Eid-Al-Fitr Trip to Playland," there was no mention of hijabs being banned on certain rides. Humayun Haq, who saw a proof of the flier before it was published, shared his concern about the lapse in an Aug. 20 email sent to more than two dozen other people — including Gawaly and the MAS Youth Center.

"I thought we were going to put a disclaimer on the flier (according to Hatem) for handicapped

accessibility and hijab (headgear) not permitted on all the rides so people can be aware of it and/or check Playland's website to see what rides they can go on."

"Please add this because we would get community backlash and I don't want us to be on the receiving end," he wrote.

According to officials, of the 26 major rides at Playland, 16 prohibit headgear. Of the 21 Kiddyland rides, 5 prohibit head gear.

Peter Tartaglia, the county's deputy parks commissioner, said Playland's staff undergoes sensitivity training each season, covering religious traditions and services to the disabled.

"We would never tell anyone wearing religious headgear to take it off," he said. "We respect their religion."

The park was back to normal Wednesday as thousands came out for a pleasant summer day.

At the Super Flight ride, one of three roller coasters, a security officer asked two Jewish youths to remove yarmulkes. They put them in their pockets, and one left his glasses in the grass before boarding the ride.

Tartaglia said glasses have to be removed as well because they can become a projectile, as some rides move up to 40 mph.

Salem said Playland's ban on head scarves on certain rides is, at best, capricious. During a visit to the amusement park three months ago, she said she was not prohibited from getting on any of the rides.

"I wasn't scared, I was shocked. I didn't expect all that to happen," she said.

She said after she stood her ground about the headgear rule, scores of unhappy people gathered at the park's entrance before moving to the exit. Some were yelling and cursing at each other, after an internal dispute arose over whether the women should just take their scarves off to go on the rides.

"That's like telling a girl to take off her shirt," Salem's twin brother, Ali, said. "Very disrespectful."

Salem said she saw a park ranger push a Muslim woman near her, perhaps by accident. The woman pushed him back. Her brother rushed to her aid, shoving and punching the ranger, she said. More violence followed.

"Rangers pulled out sticks and started hitting people, taking them to the floor," she said.

Yusef Almulaiki, 22, of Brooklyn, was there and said he had just picked up a little girl to spare her from the fray when a ranger shoved him from behind with a nightstick. Moments later, he was arrested and ticketed for disorderly conduct.

"I was arrested for no reason," he said. "It was crazy. These rangers, they did not know what they were doing. They were scared. They were shaking."

Salem said four officers tackled a woman and pinned her to the ground, and a Muslim man was punched in the face.

"They did everything so brutally," she said.

However, photographer Tara Abadir of White Plains, who witnessed the eruption, said police prevented parkgoers from being seriously hurt.

"People were just grabbing each other and fighting — I saw a man hit a woman on her back," she said.

Abadir recalled a Muslim woman pleading with an officer to let go of her friend.

"She was saying, 'Please, please sir. She's a lady. You can't touch her.' And (the officer) said 'I don't

care who she is. You can't hit people. That's not how it works.' "
