

Delaware cities: Tasered siblings, witnesses accuse police of going too far

Mom wants officers' actions investigated

BY ADAM TAYLOR • THE NEWS JOURNAL • JUNE 30, 2010

WILMINGTON -- The mother of three people subdued by police with electric shocks earlier this month in the Hilltop neighborhood is asking for an internal investigation of the officers' actions.

Cynthia Reynolds -- a 16-year veteran of the Wilmington Police Department's radio room -- said police overreacted, sending two of her adult children and her 13-year-old daughter to the ground with jolts from Tasers.

One witness said the young girl, who has a previous assault arrest, hit a police officer during the episode. But that same witness, Joseph Evans, said police escalated a confrontation that began with an innocent call about kids leaning on a car in the street.

The incident began at about 10 p.m. June 19 on the 600 block of N. Van Buren St. Evans said officers who first arrived were professional, but a struggle ensued after backup officers on bicycles arrived.

Sharne Reynolds, 22, admits cursing at the officers when they shined a flashlight into her 13-year-old sister Leah Warren's face, but denies hitting the officer. She said her arms may have flailed as she was thrown to the ground. Warren also denied hitting an officer. She said she ran toward her older sister instinctively because Sharne was hurt.

Reynolds was Tasered first, then Warren.

Evans, 20, who works as a child care provider at the nearby Hilltop Lutheran Neighborhood Center, said he heard one officer use a racial slur. The siblings are black. Evans said several officers, one of whom was black, responded to the scene.

Warren, he said, "did hit the officer because he was slamming Sharne to the ground face first and attacking her. I heard the clicking of the Tasers after that."

Pat Bailey, 55, another neighbor, said the arrests could have been avoided.

"I've been on the block for 20 years and all the respect I taught for those kids to have for police went out the window in one night," she said. "If they were armed bandits, I'd have been fine with the police doing what they had to do. But these were unarmed females."

The sisters' 23-year-old brother, Jeffery Reynolds, who is in the U.S. Air Force and stationed in Dover, was inside when police arrived. After officers fired electric shocks at Leah and Sharne, someone told Jeffery to hurry outside.

According to the police report, Jeffery Reynolds "ran at full speed" at the officers. He contends he was walking toward his sisters and was Tasered as he approached.

"I'm in the military and know a little about law-enforcement protocol," he said. "Believe me when I tell you I didn't do anything close to justify being Tasered."

Before the evening turned violent, Evans said, he believed police were looking for trouble.

Evans said he was sitting on the stoop in front of his house when an officer shined a flashlight in his face. Evans said he told the officer he lived there, a response that seemed to anger the officer.

"He got irate and was like, 'You didn't need to say that. You must not know what police can do. I'll show you in a minute,'" Evans said.

Concerned, Evans said, he called Jea Street, his boss at Hilltop Lutheran and a New Castle County councilman, before the officers tangled with the sisters. Street confirmed getting the call from Evans.

Cynthia Reynolds is asking police to conduct a special investigation.

Wilmington Police Master Sgt. Steve Barnes said police are examining the officers' use of force as a matter of routine whenever police engage a weapon, in this case non-lethal electric shock Tasers.

Doug Tuttle, an instructor at the University of Delaware's school of urban affairs and public policy, said police departments that issue Tasers teach officers to deploy them at various points on a "continuum of force."

"Less-lethal force operates on the premise that, while the police are supposed to win, they shouldn't use more force than they need to overcome the resistance they are facing," he said. "Some departments have it relatively high on their continuum and some have it relatively low on the continuum."

Barnes wouldn't release the WPD's continuum of force policy, nor would he say how often Tasers have been used this year. Public Safety Director James Mosley said Wilmington police use force on a graduating scale.

"You start with verbal, then you go to nonverbal, such as creating a barrier with your arms or something," he said. "If that doesn't work, you raise the level of your response to the physical."

Sharne Reynolds and Leah Warren were charged with felony assault against the police officers, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. Jeffery Reynolds was charged with menacing, a misdemeanor. All three were unarmed.

Jeffery and Sharne Reynolds have no criminal histories, according to a search of court records. The 13-year-old has two pending cases in Family Court, one for assault and another for criminal mischief.

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