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Ivy Ridge student's claims of abuse investigated

by James R. Donnelly

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OGDENSBURG -- Allegations that an Academy at Ivy Ridge student was roughed up by staff members after pulling a fire alarm late Saturday are being investigated by acting District Attorney Gary W. Miles.

Zelalem Telaye, 17, Nairobi, Kenya, made the allegations in a written statement to St. Lawrence County sheriff's deputies who were called to the academy about 11 p.m. Saturday. But other statements, taken from staff members and filed in Oswegatchie Town Court following the youth's arrest, describe a combative teenager who punched, elbowed and kicked at workers and had to be restrained.

And Academy Director Jason G. Finlinson said he is confident videotapes of the incident will prove staff members did nothing wrong.

Deputies charged Mr. Telaye with four counts of second-degree harassment and one count each of inciting a riot, third-degree menacing, fifth-degree criminal solicitation and disorderly conduct after an incident that began when he pulled a fire alarm.

"I really wanted to get out of Ivy Ridge, so getting expelled sounded like a good idea," Mr. Telaye wrote.

"I heard people talking about how there was supposed to be a riot the night before but it did not work out so there is going to be one tonight," he wrote.

"The thought of starting the riot crossed my mind, but I had a really bad feeling about it so I decided to forget about it," Mr. Telaye told deputies.

Initially, he attempted to create a disturbance by waving a cloth out his dorm window in an effort to set off exterior motion detectors. When that failed, he pulled the fire alarm, despite the efforts of a night staff member to stop him, he said.

"He tried to stop me but I was too fast. He grabbed me and he pushed me into the room. I cooperated and went in," the youth wrote.

A few moments later, other staff members entered the room.

"Someone else asked me what I was thinking. Before I got a chance to explain people pushed me deeper into the room so the camera does not see what is happening and jumped on me. My face was to the floor, my arms twisted, my legs twisted," Mr. Telaye wrote. He alleged he was kicked in the face, choked and pushed down a flight of stairs.

"I was taken out in the hallway and told to sit against the wall across from the entrance. While I sat there I heard the dorm parents talking about what they are going to write and making up something about me swinging at Mr. Bucky," he wrote.

When he angrily asked why they were making things up, Mr. Telaye wrote, one of the staff members winked at another.

The teen's version of events differs from those of four staff members whose supporting depositions were filed with the court by deputies.

Night watchman Vern K. Bylow, 53, Ogdensburg, said Mr. Telaye "shoulder blocked" him in order to get to the fire alarm and then ran through the hall yelling "Run, run." He pushed Mr. Telaye into a vacant room and left him there after other staff members arrived, according to his statement.

James W. McDonald 3rd, Ogdensburg, a 22-year-old house parent at the academy, said Mr. Telaye, who is known as Z, was being restrained by another house parent, Vincent E. Bresette Jr., when he arrived.

"Vincent and Z were struggling on the floor. I held Z's arm down and asked him what he was doing."

When Director George A. Tulip joined the group "We asked what to do with him," Mr. McDonald wrote.

"George said take him down stairs. Z was resisting the whole time, swinging his elbows, kicking. Z kicked me in the leg," Mr. McDonald wrote.

"We took Z down stairs. At the bottom of the stairs I set Z in a chair. Z swung at Vincent," Mr. McDonald wrote.

"He kicked me in the legs," Mr. Bresette, 38, said in his signed statement.

"We got Z down the stairs. Wes put him in the chair. That is when Z took a swing at me, hitting me above the right eye. At that point I was afraid of getting hurt. Z started kicking and flailing again," Mr. Bresette wrote.

Mr. Tulip said he and two other staff members carried Mr. Telaye from the building to a nearby supervisor's office.

"I asked Z why he did it. He stated to get expelled," Mr. Tulip wrote.

Assistant Attorney General John T. Sullivan, Watertown, whose office has been investigating Ivy Ridge, said he called Sheriff Gary J. Jarvis and Mr. Miles after reading the statements.

"We have been closely monitoring the situation at Ivy Ridge. We are mindful of the activities there," Mr. Sullivan said.

"I am going to look at the file," Mr. Miles said Tuesday afternoon. "I think the attorney general's office got the file before we did because they asked me to look into it."

Despite Mr. Telaye's allegations, deputies found nothing on which to base charges against staff members, Mr. Jarvis said.

"The deputies arrested for what they could," Mr. Jarvis said.

Mr. Telaye was taken to jail following arraignment in Town Court and, the sheriff said, "There weren't any injuries."

Although they were not involved in Saturday's incidents, state police have investigated several student allegations against Ivy Ridge staff members but have made no arrests.

"We have had recent investigations into allegations that students were subjected to physical contact or assault by staff members. The cases state police have investigated have not resulted in the arrest of any staff members due to insufficient credible evidence," Capt. Robert S. LaFountain of the state police Bureau of Criminal Investigation at Troop B headquarters in Ray Brook said.

Mr. Finlinson said he is confident video tapes of Saturday's incident will prove staff members acted properly.

"We have it on video camera. We don't have to talk to our people. We have it all on video. We have over 50 video cameras," Mr. Finlinson said.

Ivy Ridge officials were informed in advance of Saturday's incident by other students and expelled several in order to head off a planned riot similar to one in May that led to 12 arrests and 40 expulsions.

"Just like the last time the kids wanted to go home. But instead of doing it the right way, they had to break the law," Mr. Finlinson said.



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