

"THEY TREATED US

LIKE CRIMINALS"

Jennifer Velez, 18, and her friend were trying to return a shirt. But they got way more than they bargained for when the store falsely accused them of shoplifting

AS TOLD TO ROBIN EPSTEIN///PHOTOGRAPH BY KATE LACEY

"What happened to us shouldn't happen to anyone, no matter what age or race they happen to be," says Jennifer (right), with Barbie.



IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN SO SIMPLE. My friend Barbie and I went to a Manhattan department store to return a shirt that didn't fit her. But when we got there, the saleswoman said that since we didn't have the receipt she couldn't take it back. So, figuring there was nothing more we could do, Barbie put the shirt back in her shopping bag and was like, "OK, let's just go." Then, everything got crazy.

We were heading toward the exit when someone tapped me on the shoulder really roughly. I turned around to find two women yelling at us to move to the side. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Then I saw their walkie-talkies and realized they were plainclothes security guards. They asked me and Barbie what we had in our bags. We said it was just our stuff, but they demanded to see. It was really embarrassing—there were tons of people walking by, staring at us. They looked through both Barbie's bag and a Gap bag I had with me that was filled with clothes from a sleepover. I

figured if they looked and found nothing, they'd leave us alone. Instead, these women pulled out Barbie's shirt and were like, "Did you take this?" I said, "No, we just came to exchange it." But she was like, "That's not what I see. You took something of ours."

PRESUMED GUILTY

The security guards brought us into this detention area—a hot, windowless little room that smelled like urine. That's when I got really scared. The security guards took away Barbie's bag, my sleepover bag and both of our purses, then told us to sit on a metal bench across from a small jail cell and took our pictures. Next thing I knew, the guards told us to put our hands against the wall, so they could search us for weapons! The way they did it was humiliating—laughing as if it was fun. Then they handcuffed us to the bench. Horrified, we watched them dump our purses out and take our IDs—to see if we had criminal records, they said.

I kept asking how long they were going to keep us, but they just ignored me. At one point, another security guard came in and threw an older man into the cell, who complained he was claustrophobic. The guards were just like, "Take it like a man, you stupid ass." I was so shocked that they'd treat anyone like that—but just then, they turned to us and threatened to put us in there if we didn't cooperate. I was really upset, my wrists were in pain from the handcuffs, but I kept insisting that we hadn't done anything and that I wanted to call my mom. One of the security people told me, "If you're old enough to steal, you're old enough to take care of yourselves." At that point I was almost hoping the police would come, because they'd have to let us call our mothers or a lawyer.

UNTRUE CONFESSIONS

Finally, after about two hours, they shoved papers at us and told us to sign them. It was a statement admitting I'd stolen the clothes and that I'd pay for them. I repeated that we hadn't

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done anything, but they told us the faster we signed, the faster we could go home. We figured it was the only way out so Barbie and I signed the papers. They gave us back our purses, keeping Barbie's shopping bag and my sleepover bag, and said we were banned from the store for seven years.

When I got home, I told my mom what had happened. She knew what the store had done to us wasn't right, but we just tried to put it all behind us. Then, two weeks later, both Barbie and I got letters from the store demanding more than \$300. The store was actually charging me for my own clothes and multiplying it by five as a shoplifting fee! We didn't pay it, and the store threatened to take us to court.

They never did, and I was relieved. But a few months later, I saw a seg-

ment on the news about this law firm that was suing the store for unfairly profiling and pursuing minorities as shoplifters. It was like the news was about Barbie and me! We thought we might have been targeted because we're Puerto Rican, so I called the lawyer and told him what happened to us. He said it fit the pattern of what the store had been doing to other minority kids, so now we're part of a big lawsuit against the store. But it's not about the money: I know that what the store did to us was wrong, and now we've found a way to stand up for ourselves.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH A SECURITY GUARD OR COP?

Tell us what happened. Send your story to letters@teenpeople.com or fax us at 212-467-0661. Include your name, address, date of birth, age and phone number. Letters may be edited, and we may publish anything you send us.



LAW & DISORDER

You have rights! Here are a few things to keep in mind if an authority figure targets you

The cops pull you over while you're driving. Let the officer speak first—he'll ask if you know why he pulled you over, says Ronald Quartimon, director of the Neighborhood Defender Service's Students Taking Action Towards Empowerment program in New York City. Say no and let him tell you. If you were speeding or have a broken taillight, he'll ask

for your license, registration and proof of insurance. Tell him that you're going to get it, then hand it to him. You shouldn't have to get out of your car.

Store security accuses you of shoplifting. Insist on calling your parents or a lawyer and then remain silent, says Quartimon. Don't sign a confession.

The cops show up at your door, acting on a complaint about the noise from a party. Apologize and turn the music down—you don't have to let them in the house. However, if they see minors who seem drunk, they can enter the house without your permission.

You're hanging out on a street corner and the police approach you. Remain calm and don't make any sudden movements, Quartimon says. If you aren't blocking pedestrian traffic, being disruptive, trespassing or standing in front of a sign that says no (towing), you should be within your rights. If police ask you things that suggest they're investigating a crime—such as, "Where were you an hour ago?"—remember that "right to remain silent" thing. To learn more, go to ndsnyc.org and click on "Programs" or log on to streetlaw.org.