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Mother claims son beaten in "gladiator" cell

By Nancy Flake

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GALVESTON, Texas - A Montgomery County mother is questioning officials with the Galveston County Jail after her son was injured in a fight there last week at the hands of other inmates.

Eyvonne Cullens, of Midway, has asked the Galveston County Sheriff's Department Internal Affairs Division to investigate how her 22-year-old son, Allen Cullens Jr., was the only white man placed in a cell with non-white inmates, who she said badly beat him.

Jail officials verified that Internal Affairs officials are investigating the situation but deny that Cullens' son was singled out for any mistreatment by them, especially one racially motivated.

Allen Cullens Jr. was arrested July 2 by Montgomery County law enforcement officials for a probation violation in Galveston County and transported to the jail there. He was serving probation on an aggravated robbery conviction, according to Capt. Joseph Gregory, supervisor of the jail.

"I'm not a racist, but common sense tells me that even if I were a black man, you shouldn't put me in there," Eyvonne Cullens said. "I asked Internal Affairs why he was the only white man put in the cell."

She called the cell a "gladiator" tank, a term she heard from her son, which she first said refers to a cell holding members with known gang affiliations who will battle with each other.

She later said the jail had told her the cell was for young people, not known gang members.

On July 7, Allen Cullens Jr. allegedly was pulled out of his bunk at 3 a.m. by other inmates, according to his mother.

"They beat him half to death," she said. "He told me the inmates threatened him and said they would kill him."

When her son told her about the alleged beating, "I was in shock," she said.

"When I saw him on Saturday, his eye was completely closed and he was having trouble breathing. My son said they took him to a nurse, but they didn't take any X-rays; and when I asked for the medical report, they couldn't find it."

She is also said her son's attorney, Tad Nelson, of Galveston, was denied the chance to visit his client Friday and take photos of his injuries.

"They said, 'You better have a court order,'" she said.

Gregory said Cullens was injured in a jail fight and was not badly injured.

"I've seen 10 times as worse," he said. "He's got a small bruise on the eye, a small cut on the lip and some loose teeth. We immediately got him medical attention, and he'll be seeing a dentist."

Gregory said he was not familiar with the term "gladiator" tank and that Cullens was placed in a cell according to state jail standards.

"He was housed accordingly to age and charges," he said. "There were 19 people in there; 12 blacks and seven whites and Hispanics.

"That's pretty normal for Galveston County."

Gregory said no other inmates were injured in the fight, which occurred in a 21-man tank.

As to why Nelson was not allowed to photograph Cullens, "We don't allow cameras," Gregory said. "He didn't even ask to visit with his client; he just wanted to take pictures."

Nelson did not return a phone call from The Courier asking for comment.

The term "gladiator" tank is one unfamiliar to officials at the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, who oversee jails throughout Texas to ensure they are following state laws and regulations.

"They can have up to a 24-man tank," spokesman Shannon Herklotz said. "It probably had 24 bunks in it."

He said space regulations in a 24-man tank allow 40 square feet for the first inmate and 18 additional square feet for each inmate thereafter.

The Texas Administrative Code states that inmates shall be "classified and housed in the least restrictive housing available without jeopardizing staff, inmates or the public."

It lists several housing criteria, which "shall not include race, ethnicity or religious preference."

Montgomery County Sheriff Guy Williams also is not familiar with a so-called "gladiator" tank, he said.

"I've never heard of it," Williams said. "That type of conduct is prohibited. It's common practice in prisons to segregate prisoners, usually by age. You usually put gang members together."

The Internal Affairs investigation should wrap up quickly, according to Gregory.

"Internal Affairs will make sure everything was proper and done correctly," he said. "We're not worried about anything. We're not trying to hide anything. His mother's irate. It happens every now and then."

"Younger guys seem to fight more."

Eyvonne Cullens said she is putting her trust in Internal Affairs.

"I'm asking questions; I'm not making allegations," she said. "My son was threatened and beaten in jail."

"I'm worried about my son's safety in jail."