

Bashed from all sides, mother struggles to keep her children

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By Elaine McArdle

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NEW BEDFORD — Clutching a paper towel to her bleeding nose, Bernadette Gouveia — a painfully thin woman of 28, with tattoos on her back, leg and wrist — entered the courtroom Tuesday for her bail review hearing.

About 30 feet away in the spectators' area, her two young daughters waved and smiled, delighted to see her.

The Fall River family, which also includes a 2-year-old and a 9-month-old, had been separated since Sunday night, when the older girls, Jessica, 10, and Jennifer, 12, called police and said their mother was beaten by her boyfriend.

The police arrived — and arrested Ms. Gouveia on a charge of welfare fraud.

Randall Bergeron was arrested and charged with three counts of assault and battery — on Ms. Gouveia and her daughters — and one count of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, according to a prosecutor in Fall River.

A Fall River judge on Monday set her bail at \$500 cash because of other outstanding warrants for her arrest. Ms. Gouveia has a history of failing to appear in court, including 3rd District Court in New Bedford, on other charges, including drunken driving, according to court officials and documents.

She said she did not show up in court because she feared being sent to prison and separated from her children.

But Tuesday, Superior Court Judge Hurd praised Jennifer and Jessica for their responsibility in calling the police and released their mother from custody.

Ms. Gouveia, her eyes blackened from the beating and the front of her shirt covered with drops of blood, burst into tears.

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"Now you've been beaten up," said Judge Hurd to Ms. Gouveia. "Have you gotten a 209A so he won't beat you up anymore?"

Ms. Gouveia said she did not know about 209A, a provision in state law providing for a restraining order to protect someone, usually in a domestic situation.

Judge Hurd asked court personnel to help her get a restraining order.

"She's not going to last very long unless she gets a 209A," he said.

Minutes later, Ms. Gouveia was reunited with Jessica and Jennifer, who came to court with Ms. Gouveia's sister, Tina Quinlan, and Ms. Gouveia's former boyfriend, Steve Torchia.

The girls said their mother was beaten with a baseball bat, bitten on the shoulder, and kicked in the face by Mr. Bergeron so that she was unconscious for five minutes. They were attacked as they tried to protect her, said Jessica, curling up her upper lip to display a cut.

To their horror, their mother was arrested too.

Mr. Torchia, the father of Ms. Gou-

veia's 9-month-old daughter Carly, said she is a good mother who loves her children.

Added Jessica, a bright, smiling girl: "She never hits us."

Ms. Gouveia later got the restraining order from 2nd District Court in Fall River. But she is worried that due to Sunday's incident, her four children will be placed in foster homes.

Jennifer and Jessica were previously in foster care because of their mother's alcohol problems, Ms. Quinlan said.

Ms. Quinlan said her sister, in an effort to keep custody of her children, has been off drugs and alcohol for at least a year.

"She's passed clean urine, and they did a test on the baby when she was born, and there were no drugs," she said.

Ms. Gouveia fears the four children will be taken from her. According to Ms. Gouveia, someone filed a petition against her Monday, claiming that she has endangered her children by keeping them in a violent atmosphere.

"I didn't ask for this," she said. "I don't see why my kids should be punished. I've been out of trouble for two

years, and that doesn't account for nothing."

Ms. Gouveia said she does not know what the welfare charge is about.

Asked if she is concerned about her children having witnessed violence and alcohol abuse, and foster homes — not to mention the sight of their mother in handcuffs — Ms. Gouveia shook her head.

"The kids are more mature," she said. "They're very intelligent and know I'm going to be punished (for the outstanding charges) but they want to stay together."

"My oldest is almost 13, and she doesn't even smoke," she added.