

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A01**LENGTH:** 778 words**HEADLINE:** Metro Snack Patrol Puts Girl in Cuffs; 12-Year-Old Eating Fries Among 35 Cited or Arrested in Zero-Tolerance Crackdown**BYLINE:** Petula Dvorak , Washington Post Staff Writer**BODY:**

Ansche Hedgepeth had practically never been in trouble, let alone arrested. Then the officer clicked the metal cuffs on the 12-year-old's wrists and pulled the laces out of her tennis shoes.

She had been eating French fries in a Metro station, and now she was questioned, searched and taken away.

"We really do believe in zero tolerance," said Metro Transit Police Chief Barry J. McDevitt, who is unapologetic for such arrests.

Commuter complaints about unlawful eating on Metro cars and in stations led McDevitt to mount a week-long undercover crackdown on violators last month, and a dozen plainclothes officers cited or arrested 35 people, 13 of them juveniles. Only one adult was arrested.

Had Ansche and the other juveniles been adults, they simply would have received citations for fines up to \$300. But, McDevitt pointed out, juveniles charged with criminal offenses in the District must be taken into custody.

And, he said, it is department policy to handcuff anyone who is arrested, no matter the age. "Anyone taken into custody has to be handcuffed for officer safety," McDevitt said. Youngsters "can kill you, too."

Ansche well remembers Oct. 23, the first day of the crackdown.

The seventh-grader at Deal Junior High School said the Tenleytown-AU station, where she was nabbed, is "just a place where a lot of kids go. There's a hot dog stand and Cafe Med, where I bought my fries."

She said she took the elevator to the station with a friend. As the pair passed the station kiosk, a man stepped in front of Ansche.

"He said: 'Put down your fries. Put down your book bag,' " Ansche said. "They searched my book bag and searched me. They asked me if I have any drugs or alcohol."

Ansche, who keeps her science fair trophy next to her bed, said she has never been asked those questions or searched like that before.

"I was embarrassed. I told my friend to call my mom, but I didn't tell anybody else," she said. She said she never talked to the officer, although Metro police insist that she was asked whether she knew eating was against the law and that she said she did. They said anyone who doesn't know about the law usually is given a warning first.

The youths were all taken to the detention center, where they were checked in, fingerprinted and held for their parents to pick them up, McDevitt said.

Ansche now must perform community service and undergo counseling at the Boys and Girls Club, one of the sentences Metro has chosen for underage snacking scofflaws.

"I can't believe there isn't a better way to teach kids a lesson," said Anshe's mother, Tracey Hedgepeth. "The police treated her like a criminal."

She wrote a letter complaining about the incident, and McDevitt replied: "While I am sorry that it was necessary to take your daughter into custody, I hope you also understand the important responsibility we have to keep public transportation safe and clean."

Metro spokesman Ray Feldmann said yesterday: "We were tired of people eating and drinking on the train, spilling things and leaving partially eaten food and containers. People complained last spring about how debris gets on the third rail and starts minor fires." Signs warning that it is illegal to eat or drink on the cars and in the stations are posted in the Metro system.

Metro police say the Tenleytown-AU station has been a trouble zone for years. McDevitt said daily patrols are necessary to monitor unruly students. For years, transit police have conferred with school officials and students to stress their "zero tolerance" policy and explain the consequences, McDevitt said.

Even some commuters thought arresting them was harsh. "If it's eating, that seems like an overreaction to me," said Joshua Silver, founder of Metrowatch, a subway riders advocacy group.

"There are a lot more creative responses," Silver said. "Why didn't Metro go into Wilson High School and hold a forum for students to talk about why they shouldn't eat on the subway?"

McDevitt said that is exactly the approach his officers have tried, to little effect. He said the trash situation has been particularly bad at Tenleytown.

"We had not only customers complaining," he said. "Train conductors were also complaining about how trashed their trains were, and they were asking for more enforcement."

Tracey Hedgepeth agrees with sticking to the rules, but she wonders why police couldn't issue warnings.

"How do they expect kids to grow up trusting police?" she said. "My daughter will now grow up knowing she's been in handcuffs. All over a French fry."

Staff writers Lyndsey Layton and Stephen C. Fehr contributed to this report.

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