

# News

## Defending your life

### Teens, women get hands-on in self-defense clinic

By Romi Herron  
Staff writer

While parents, law enforcement and school officials often work together to keep teens safe, some youths are realizing they need to do all they can to increase their personal safety. At a hands-on self-defense clinic in Lombard March 27, young girls and women learned heightened awareness may be the simple solution.

Self-defense instructor Laura Austria of Lombard said sexual assault, abduction and online dating often target unsuspecting females, so making wise choices is key to staying safe in today's world. At Chang's Hapkido Academy in Lombard, Austria urged clinic participants from Elmhurst, Villa Park, Lombard and Glen Ellyn to protect themselves with their minds first and basic physical techniques second, if necessary.

"With choices you're faced with making, in accepting rides from people, taking drinks from others or taking shortcuts



to escape or get help.

Chang taught the participants to strike an assailant in the ears or throat region and to use their voices. Knee kicks to the groin were also taught in the class.

Sheroy Mehta, 24, of Elmhurst, is a mechanic who studies martial arts and volunteered as an "opponent" for the event. He also emphasized the need for women to never let their guards down.

"The most important thing I think (for young girls and women) to remember is to be prepared. You never know who (an assailant) could be. There doesn't always have to be a reason," Mehta said.

Austria, a fourth degree black belt, said common sense judgment about avoiding obvious danger

dren, teens and adults frequent more outdoor attractions, including parks or beaches, where strangers abound. Though everyone has a right to be at those sites alone, Austria said, good judgment with personal safety in mind should always supersede a right to do anything.

"Sometimes I hear women say, 'Well, I have the right to go take a shortcut,' or 'I have the right to be out at 2 a.m. by myself if I want,' and I tell them, 'yes, you do have the right, but how many rights will you feel like you have if you get assaulted?' Not very many."

Austria talked briefly about an abduction case in Florida earlier this year in which a 13-year-old girl was taking a shortcut when she was

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first and basic physical techniques second, if necessary.

"With choices you're faced with making, in accepting rides from people, taking drinks from others or taking shortcuts (when walking alone), if people made better choices, that is a self-defense of its own," she said. Sometimes, taking precaution doesn't prevent an attempted assault, and in those cases, young girls and women need to be prepared, she said.

Thirteen-year-old Rosa Laurenzana of Lombard was the youngest to take part in the clinic. Joined by an attorney, an engineer, a stay-at-home mom, and several high school and college students, Rosa and the group's other members all had something in common: All want to avoid becoming a statistic.

"I wanted to learn some self-defense because there is so much going on in society that can happen to people and I want to be able to protect myself," said Rosa, an eighth-grader at Sacred Heart School in Lombard. "I am learning ways to be more alert and pay attention to things in many situations. This has definitely helped me."

At the March 27 event, Rosa practiced simple techniques with trained adult "opponents" to experience the full effect. The



Staff photos by Julie Astrowski

Rosa Laurenzana, 13, of Lombard applies a take-down technique on martial arts student Bill Anderson of Glendale Heights March 27. Rosa was the youngest participant at the women's self-defense seminar at Chang's Hapkido Academy in Lombard and said the training empowers her.

moves focused on getting away from an assailant's grasp, and on restraining an attacker until help arrives.

Hapkido Grand Master Gedo Chang, who founded the Lombard school, said knowing even one basic technique can make the difference. He said most assailants are people the victim knows or trusts, and most do not even use weapons in their assaults. Overcoming fear, which can be paralyzing, Chang said, is most important for victims.

"Practicing just one technique correctly, over and over again, so that it becomes habit," Chang said, "will become natural instinct in a real scenario."

Attackers tend to follow a pattern in some cases, which

gives an alert potential victim a chance to recognize signs, Chang said.

Austria explained common stages that precede an attempted assault.

"The first is the intrusion stage, in which someone either verbally or physically comes too close," she said. "That's where it all begins."

Next, desensitization occurs if someone fails to put a stop to the intrusion, she said.

"Verbalize what you feel. Tell (him) to get away from you. Don't worry about being polite," Austria said.

Third, and potentially the most dangerous stage, is isolation. That is when an assailant tries to get the victim alone, so they are unable

fourth degree black belt, said common sense judgment about avoiding obvious danger zones, like teen drinking parties, after-hours clubs or poorly lit, desolate shortcuts, can be lifesaving. In addition, she said, general

awareness is beneficial in day-to-day situations. An example she gave is for pedestrians on their way to work or school, or on a leisurely walk or run, to remain alert.

"Walk with your head up, pay attention, be aware of your surroundings and your own physical condition," she said. "It's all part of listening to your own common sense."

Jessica Artisuk, 10, of Villa Park, said she studied self-defense for three years. She has taken part in presentations to motivate other girls her age to understand the importance of awareness.

Drinking alcohol is one way people slow down their own reaction times, increasing their chances for injuries or attacks, according to Austria.

With warmer weather, chil-

**from people, taking drinks from others or taking shortcuts (when walking alone), if people made better choices, that is a self-defense of its own.'**

Laura Austria

self defense instructor

da earlier this year in which a 13-year-old girl was taking a shortcut when she was allegedly abducted and killed by a stranger.

"When I saw the (televised surveillance) videotape of the

abduction, it just made me cry because the way he grabbed her, I saw how simple it would have been for her to get away, to save her life," she said.

However, the ideal scenario, Austria said, would have been for the girl to avoid taking the shortcut, walking on a more visible route altogether.

Chang urged the women and young teens to protect their survival, and reminded them that criminal behavior and danger in society is the reason self-defense exists.

"Be disciplined in making good decisions. Knowing how to avoid (dangerous) circumstances will help you prevent these situations. It's all up to you," he said. "Remember that. It's up to you."

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