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Personal safety without packing a punch

By SEAN MEYER, The Londoner

Student Carol Kurek, 53, gets a arm grip on Derek Bindner, owner of Aikido Network, during a women's only personal safety training program at the martial arts school. So far 10 women have signed up for a program Mr. Bindner says focuses on intelligence, body positioning and balance rather than punching and kicking.

SEAN MEYER PHOTO



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A 53-year-old woman of small build and seemingly timid nature might just make a tempting target to would-be thieves or anyone looking for what they might consider an easy victim.

But anyone who tries something with Carol Kurek is likely to find themselves thrown to the ground in a heap with her knee buried in their neck. And for that, Mrs. Kurek says, she is very thankful for what Derek Bindner has taught her.

Mr. Bindner, owner of Aikido Network martial arts school, recently began teaching a woman's only personal safety training, which he says draws on not only his years of experience studying and teaching aikido and Brazilian ju-jitsu, but as his background as a professional bouncer and personal bodyguard.

"This is something that has always been on my mind, ever since I first started up in 1997. As far as I know, it is the first woman's only program of its kind in London," Mr. Bindner says. "It's hard to get woman to come out when you attach the words martial arts to it, they seem to think of that as something that only appeals to men. But I did a six-week program on women's self protection back mid-September and it got 16 women out. They loved it so much I asked if they would be interested in coming once a week, every Tuesday, and 10 women signed up right away."

Mrs. Kurek was among the very first to sign up.

"I feel it is something very unique for someone in my age group. I really wanted to make fitness a bigger part of my life, something more physical than the gyms," she says. "My son studies ju-jitsu with Derek so when they offered the six-week program I tried it and I loved it. I thought it was a real opportunity to get fit and to learn something that could one day save your life."

The women's only program focuses on mind and body fitness, overall health and well-being, as well as learning how to effectively – and intelligently – deal with possibly bigger and stronger attackers.

"I think it is very important for women to do personal safety training in a non-threatening atmosphere. And to do it with intelligence where it isn't all about hitting and striking," Mr. Bindner says. "I know at places like GoodLife women's only programs have taken off. They want to feel comfortable and not be gawked at. That's what makes this so appealing to them I think. And I also want to change that perception of martial arts. You can be intelligent in how you use it; you don't have to be a tough guy. It doesn't rely on striking, on strength. It's intelligence and body movement. The system I teach will control an attacker to the ground. If someone grabs you, that's great, you then will know exactly what to do."

For Mrs. Kurek, those techniques aren't easy to learn, but the process of doing so has been an enjoyable one.

"Derek is so tuned in to our needs, our age. He's geared the course to our needs. He has shown us a middle-aged woman is not helpless, doesn't have to be a victim," she says. "I have the ability to defend myself. I have learned how to use my body, to be confident. It really instills a lot of self-esteem."

Mr. Bindner says he teaches the woman using the principles of fulcrums and levers; on using an opponent's own body against them. "If someone grabs you they don't have control of you. Your whole body is stronger than their hand. It's about timing and balance, using their energy against them."

That part of the program really appeals to Mrs. Kurek.

"I think any woman these days looks over their shoulder when they are alone. What we are learning is how to present yourself. How to find that power inside. You can flee, that's not a bad idea at all. If you can't flee, you can fight. But what you can't do is freeze. If you freeze, you could be dead. Derek's given us the tools to do that. And he does it with such grace and ease. It isn't easy, these are very interesting techniques. But I know I can do this with not a lot of effort and that's a great little prize."

While the program teaches personal safety techniques from a physical stand point, Mr. Bindner says the mental side is also a focus.

In fact, the first 15 minutes of the one-hour class is spent discussing women's issues and what the particular concerns of the women in his class are.

"We prepare the mind as well. We talk about what they have read about in the newspaper, seen on TV. We talk about issues of concern to women," Mr. Bindner says. "I like to think I am sensitive to what they are talking about, but I also offer a man's perspective. The majority of attackers are men, so I can maybe help get into their minds, what their psychology might be and we address that."

The sensitivity Mr. Bindner says he tries to bring to the classes is something Mrs. Kurek says she and her fellow students definitely appreciate.

"He is very sensitive, he is infinitely patient. This is all foreign to us and yet he will go over it over and over again. But also we have given him some insight too. Women are assaulted in a very different way. A predator would think twice about attacking someone like Derek, but not someone like me. So he is always asking us, does this feel right? He's learning things from us and that makes for a real nice atmosphere. He's an excellent instructor and a good listener. He obviously cares very much he is teaching us something that could save our lives."

The women in the program range in age from 17 to their early 50s. From his perspective, Mr. Bindner says his class is open to any woman who wants to learn. "We are looking for that empty cup attitude. We want them to have fun, but we want them to have questions and I like to provide solutions. That's a big word for us here, solutions."

With 12 years as a professional bouncer and another 2 1/2 years as a bodyguard, Mr. Bindner says he can provide the women with an insight beyond simple learning techniques in a classroom.

"We are nice about it in here. I certainly am not trying to hurt anyone. But it is nastier out there on the streets. So I want them to be prepared for that," Mr. Bindner says. "I also teach a class to students at Western, one day is women only, the other two co-ed. I had a young woman come in, she was timid and didn't want to hurt anyone, but I told her in the real world, if someone tries to grab you they are going to be doing it harder than I will be. I want them to be prepared with what to do if they find themselves in that situation."

WANT MORE INFO?

- For more information about the Aikido Network's women's only personal safety training program contact Derek Bindner at 519-660-0992 or visit www.aikidonetwork.com.

The Health & Wellness feature appears at an approximately one month interval