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Eastport Girls Club members learn self-defense techniques

By LINDSAY POWERS, Staff Writer
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Gathered on the blue mats of the East Coast Martial Arts studio in Annapolis last week, six Eastport Girls Club members learned not how to become the next Karate Kid, but rather how to escape an attacker with a few simple maneuvers.



Lindsay Powers – The Capital
 Master Instructor Tommy Lee of East Coast Martial Arts shows Bryana Bynum, 12, how to get out of Eastport Girls Club mentor Carolyn Kolarik's hold in a self-defense class last week.

The self-defense class was one of many summer activities organized for the young girls of the Eastport club, a nonprofit formed in 2008 that offers mentoring, tutoring, fun activities and other services as part of a weekly after-school program for girls ages 11 to 14 from public housing in Eastport and other local neighborhoods.

This is the second year the girls have had the opportunity to partake in club activities, which included a trip to a community pool and a boat ride in the Annapolis Harbor.

"We've been able to keep closer contact with the girls," said Karen Feldman, volunteer coordinator and one of the club's founders.

Feldman said efforts by the club's volunteer mentors have made summer activities like the visit to the martial arts studio possible.

"It's an experience [the girls don't have the opportunity to have otherwise]," she said.

In Wednesday's class, which was free for the club, six of the club's 15 or so girls clearly had fun while learning some simple defense techniques as well as preventive strategies.

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Master Instructor Tommy Lee, also the studio's owner, emphasized that the girls should first attempt to avoid dangerous situations with strangers and physical conflicts in general, whether it means crossing to the other side of the street to avoid passing a stranger who seems threatening, sticking with a buddy, or not responding to someone's verbal provocations. Lee also stressed that girls should always be aware of their surroundings, including where help might be located, if they find themselves in possible danger.

"Being smart is a lot better than being strong," Lee told the girls.

However, in case they did find themselves in a situation where they had to escape someone's hold, Lee demonstrated several self-defense techniques that would enable a quick getaway without requiring significant strength from the girls.

One scenario in the class involved an attacker grabbing someone around the neck. In this case, the girls were shown how to grab and turn the attacker's wrists, push them away while stepping back, and then turn the attacker away from them.

Lee said this as well as other "release techniques" would provide a "two- to four- second window to escape."

Either practicing on each other or with the club's mentors, the girls acted out many of the techniques with gusto.

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Other scenarios included getting away from someone who has grabbed your wrist and is dragging you away (step on their foot and use your free hand to pull the other away), and escaping a bear hug from the front or from behind (stick your thumbs in the hollow space just below the ears and push up, or pinch them on the inside of their thigh or on their side). Lee also advised to keep an obstacle between you and the attacker and to yell things that would get people's attention such as "Don't touch me!"

But it all came back to avoiding a confrontation in the first place. Lee spoke about not only avoiding strangers who could pose a threat, but also about avoiding involvement in bullying or other behavior that could provoke someone to try to fight or hurt them.

"The benefit was not to teach them how to kick and punch, but to use their brain and stay out of trouble," Feldman said.

Shakiara Edmonds, 13, who will soon be a 7th grader at Annapolis Middle School, said she learned that it's best to get out of a dangerous situation quickly.

"It's [better in self-defense to not hit back and try to get away and say 'help,'" Shakiara said.

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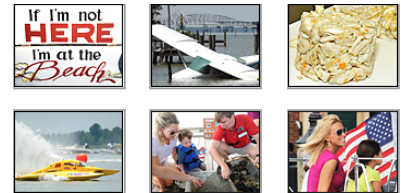
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