



GirlStrength, a Portland Police Bureau program, teaches self-defense and helps build confidence

By Special to The Oregonian

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It's 9:45 on a Monday morning, a time when most middle schoolers wish they were still in bed. But in the gym at **Portland Christian School** in Northeast Portland, seventh-grade girls are yelling, kicking and giggling as part of a twice-weekly **GirlStrength program**.

They're clearly having fun, but the girls are also learning how to use their voices and bodies to defend themselves, how to have healthy relationships and, above all, how to trust their intuition and walk in the world with confidence -- and a mean back kick.

Started in 2009 by the Portland Police Bureau, GirlStrength is a nine-week self-defense and interpersonal skill-building program offered for free at elementary and middle schools. It's based on the popular WomenStrength program, which has been teaching similar skills to women since 1979.

After one year, GirlStrength has instituted regular programs in 12 schools, run 20 one-day workshops and reached more than 500 girls in Portland. Because of demand from parents and teachers, the police bureau is offering a series of weeklong GirlStrength camps this summer at local community centers.

GirlStrength's director is Carlyne Haycraft, a 5-foot Australian dynamo with a background in martial arts and theater, both of which she drew upon to create the program's curriculum.

"GirlStrength approaches defense in a way no other program does," Haycraft says. "We do a lot of activities that incorporate using your voice, body and internal assertiveness to project to an attacker your power and strength."

Role-playing is a key feature, whether it's the two instructors improvising a scenario or the girls acting out a script. From verbal insults to physical abuse, the topics covered run the gamut of adolescent experience.

"We put warning signs in there: isolation, boundary intrusion," Haycraft says. "Afterwards, we talk about what the girls saw and strategies to stay safe."

Haycraft and co-instructor Lisa Ernst have just presented a scenario in which a girl is cornered by a boy at a party and feels unsafe.

"What safety plan could she have?" asks Ernst. Girls raise their hands -- some enthusiastically, some tentatively -- and volunteer their ideas.

"Run to the bathroom."



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Ann Croze, a P.E. and health instructor at the Portland Christian School, works with seventh-grade girls during a GirlStrength session. The program, created by the Portland Police Bureau, teaches girls self-defense and interpersonal skill-building.

"Scan the room for an exit."

"Use internal affirmation -- 'I am strong.'"

"Good!" says Haycraft, exhibiting the positive reinforcement and encouragement she uses to create a safe space for the girls.

All GirlStrength instructors are volunteers, and many are former WomenStrength participants. They must pass a bureau background check and complete 120 hours of training before co-leading a class.

"I'd never felt more empowered and aware," Ernst says of taking the WomenStrength class. It inspired her to become a GirlStrength instructor, and she's relished the experience.

"It's amazing, the connections the girls make," Ernst says. "They're very perceptive."

Sometimes, however, the program pushes the girls out of their comfort zones. Haycraft describes a recent activity where the girls practiced yelling in their loudest voices.

"One girl started crying because she couldn't take the noise," Haycraft recalls. "The school representative took her off and worked with her, and she came back for the rest of class even when given the choice not to participate.

"Two weeks later, she was using her voice," Haycraft says, "and liking it."

At Portland Christian, the girls stomp, kick, punch and yell "No! Back off!" at the top of their lungs. Their voices, like their moves, are unsure at first, then grow in strength and self-assuredness until they're all laughing and cheering each other on.

Kelsey Hire, a petite, soft-spoken 12-year-old, says that "while it's scary knowing that at any moment you could be attacked, I've liked learning that there are ways to get out of dangerous situations. I'm more conscious of how I'm setting boundaries and how I can use them in the future" to stay safe.

At the end of the hour, the girls gather in a circle and share what they've learned. One girl says, "I learned that it's better to speak out than to hold what's happened to me inside." Haycraft nods knowingly.

Before they rush to their next class, the girls huddle in closely, putting their hands together in the center of their circle. Haycraft leads them in affirmations, shouting:

"Girls are smart!"

"Girls are confident!"

"Girls ROCK!"

--Rebecca Robinson, Special to The Oregonian

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