

women's HEALTH



PARKER MICHELS-BOYCE

FIGHT LIKE A GIRL

After the #MeToo movement, women decide to strike back

BY SCOTT BASS EDITOR

As a teenager, Melody Bergman spent hours in front of the mirror at the karate dojo practicing her punches and kicks, shadowboxing against imaginary attackers.

None of it helped her, though, when she found herself pinned to a bed by a 6 foot, 3 inch man who outweighed her by more than 100 pounds. Bergman was a journalism student at Brigham Young University on assignment in 2002, interviewing a war veteran at a nursing home in Provo, Utah. She recalls the interview went well – until it didn't.

"Everything was normal, and then he came at me and pinned me on the bed. He said, 'You know that you want this,'" Bergman remembers. She managed to slide off the bed using a passive technique she learned at the dojo, allowing her body to go limp to loosen his grip: "You fight the energy to hold you tight, just droop. And that's how I got out."

As a survivor of multiple sexual assaults as a young girl, and a difficult marriage later in life, the attack in 2002 wasn't Bergman's most traumatic experience. She never reported the assault, and didn't tell anyone about the incident. But it made her rethink her martial arts

Instructor Kayla English drills a takedown with Christian Bergman at the Tactical Martial Arts Academy in North Chesterfield.

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training.

After her first marriage fell apart in 2012, Bergman moved to Chesterfield to be closer to family. She married again later that year, and she and her new husband were looking for a school that focused on self defense and street smarts. She found it in North Chesterfield, at the Tactical Martial Arts Academy. Led by Keith English, who has six black belts in multiple disciplines and trains law enforcement officers for local police departments, the school was perfect for Bergman and her husband, Christian, who is also a martial artist.

“Traditional martial arts has its place. In the street, it’s just not enough,” says Bergman, now 39 and a mother of two boys, 8 and 12. “When I ended up in a situation where I was attacked, I didn’t end up using my katas, my punches and kicks. I needed something more practical. I needed something fast.”

Over the past few years, more women are beginning to think like Bergman. In the wake of the #MeToo movement that launched a national conversation about sexual assault, and the election of Donald Trump – who won the presidency in 2016 despite multiple allegations of sexual misconduct – many women are fighting back. Literally. Across the country, dojos like English’s martial arts academy are giving women the tools to not just fend off an attack, but to gain a sense of self-empowerment in a culture where girls are more often socialized to be passive and polite than assertive and combative.

“A lot of women when they first come here don’t have the personality, frankly, to defend themselves,” says English, who has 43 years in martial arts training. English has an extensive background in combat hapkido, and created his own street-focused form called “hosindo,” which is Korean for self defense, incorporating a variety of grappling, striking, joint-locks and throwing techniques. He also spent 18 years as a professional bounty hunter. “If you are going to defend yourself, it really takes an aggressive type of nature,” says English, who’s 6 feet, 2 inches tall and weighs approximately 250 pounds. “In real life, big people attack small people. We spend a lot of time with women ... to help them understand that they are powerful, and they can choose to use it if they need it.”

English says more than half of his



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approximately 200 students are women, or about 60%, and over the last few years he’s seen the numbers increase. He attributes this to a rise in awareness, or more specifically the viral videos that quickly spread on social media following attacks. Last Wednesday, for instance, he spent the entirety of his adult self-defense class dissecting an attack caught on video and broadcast on Fox News.

In the video, a woman in California was attempting to escape the clutches of her estranged boyfriend, and ran to a neighbor’s home for help. A doorbell cam caught her ex following close behind, grabbing her by the hair and dragging her onto the lawn. The woman screams for help and he threatens to kill her; a neighbor told CNN she witnessed the man repeatedly stomping her in the front yard.

“She passes the car out front,” English tells his students. Why not bang on the car, see if you can set off the car alarm, and then slide underneath? “Running down the street and hiding under a car. This is called using your surroundings.”

The lesson: The best self-defense is avoiding, or escaping, an attack. Of course, with

some training, the woman in the video could have disabled the man when he reached for her hair, gouging his eyes, English says. His students then work on a brush-trap technique – defending, or brushing, the arm that is either reaching to grab or striking, and then trapping the arm, collapsing the elbow and taking the attacker’s neck in a succession of moves. The technique quickly steals the attacker’s balance, opening him up for a strike to the face, eyes or throat, whatever is necessary to disable the assailant and escape.

Bergman, who is also an instructor at the school, says self-defense training is empowering. “We tell everybody, police don’t stop crime. They get there after it’s done. They do damage control,” she says. “We’ve got to be ready to take care of ourselves. We can’t be waiting for somebody else to take care of us. We’ve got to be ready.”

Across the country, it’s a message that

Keith English, lead instructor at the Tactical Martial Arts Academy, and his wife, Kayla English, taught students last week how to respond to an attacker who grabs and pulls you by the hair.

seems to be resonating. From elite boxing gyms in major cities to the rise in popularity of mixed martial arts – a cage-fighting sport wherein the fighters incorporate a multitude of striking, wrestling and other techniques – there are more schools opening and self-defense training seminars available for adults.

It’s no longer just karate and taekwondo and kid-friendly after-school programs. Many schools offer a mix of disciplines, with a focus on more practical self-defense for adults – Bruce Lee’s hybrid jeet kune do, the ground

fighting of Brazilian jujitsu, the boxing and kickboxing of Thailand’s muay thai and the ultra-aggressive krav maga that originated with the Israeli military, just to name a few. Krav maga, for instance, is meant to be taught relatively quickly – disabling strikes, breaking chokeholds, knife and gun defenses.

Mark Winn, a 30-year veteran of martial

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arts with a background in Okinawa karate and kung fu, says students at his school off of Hull Street Road, Winning Warrior Krav Maga, go home with a technique that they can use after just about every class.

"This is break the glass and pull the pin," he says of the krav philosophy, which aims to neutralize attackers with overwhelming force. "I would still rather avoid, run or hide," he says. But if a confrontation is unavoidable? "We have to bring more force, overwhelming force to what you're doing in order to neutralize the threat," he explains, and it has to happen quickly. "The longer the exchange goes, the more chance you have to lose."

Since opening the school in 2016, Winn says more women are joining. About a third of his 35 or so students are women. "I have ladies ... that have said that the climate in America is such that they feel that need to protect themselves," he says.

While difficult to quantify, many schools across the country have seen an increase in female students since Trump took office. His election and the #MeToo movement a year later have heightened awareness about sexual violence toward women, says Joceyln Hollander, a sociology professor at the University of Oregon.

"I can tell you that every self-defense instructor I know" has seen an increase in female students, says Hollander, who has researched and written extensively on sexual assault and sexual assault prevention. "With the #MeToo movement, there is certainly more awareness [of sexual assault]. People are becoming more

aware of how pervasive it is. The election, and sort of the tone of the government, is making people feel more fearful."

Getting a handle on the size and scope of the problem isn't an exact science. Only about 30% of sexual assaults are even reported to the police, according to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, or RAINN, an anti-sexual violence organization.

According to the U.S. Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Survey, on average there are 433,648 victims of rape and sexual assault (age 12 and older) every year, the vast majority of which are female. In fact, 82% of all juvenile rape victims and 90% of adult rape victims are female, according to RAINN.

While reported sexual assaults have generally decreased in the last three decades, since 2013 the number of reported rapes has increased by 18%, according to the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reporting survey of law enforcement agencies across the U.S. But the increase coincides with a change in how the FBI classifies rape, expanding what's included in the category. It's also hard to say if more sexual assaults are occurring or if more incidents are simply being reported.

"Admittedly, the number of rapes reported is abysmally low," says Gay Cutchin, a sociology professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. But she says awareness is improving. After more than two decades of teaching about sexual violence against women and working as VCU's Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Services coordinator, she says

men in general "are more aware of what constitutes sexual assault." And women are becoming more comfortable reporting attacks, Cutchin says: "When I started this work, no one reported [sexual assault] to the police."

There are caveats, however. While self-defense training can no doubt be empowering for many women, some academics worry that it can be seen as blame-shifting: In other words, it puts the onus of avoiding or defending against an attack on the victim, instead of focusing on the perpetrator. Also, the percentage of women attacked by strangers is statistically low: About 80% of sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim.

"I think many people who do self-defense training make the assumption that most sexual assaults are committed by strangers, and they are not," Cutchin says. Assaults don't necessarily begin with a physical confrontation, she says: "If you look at the national news stories with celebrities and the whole #MeToo movement, it wasn't about physical force, it was about power over them. They used their social power, not physical force, to force them to do something they didn't want to do."

Still, Cutchin says she is in no way against self-defense training: "I would never say don't do it. It is empowering. It is healthy."

At first, Melody Bergman's training at the Tactical Martial Arts Academy could be triggering.

"It was hard for me. It's very hands on.

When I was training martial arts before, you could go for years on the mat and not touch another person... you're just punching and kicking the air," Bergman says. "But here we're grabbing each other. We're always touching each other. I'm working with big guys, and we're throwing each other. And I would go home and cry. I'd tell my husband, I can't do this. Because it's real. You picture yourself getting attacked, and getting raped."

Yet this training has been a critical part of what's become a lifelong journey for Bergman. She works as an advocate for the National Center on Sexual Exploitation in Washington, D.C., and freelances as a writer and editor part-time. She finds herself speaking to moms and young girls on a regular basis during self-defense seminars at the academy. The younger girls are taught to be assertive, and how to respond to bullying, but Bergman says high school girls learn about the realities of date rape and sexual assault.

"We're real about it," Bergman says. "We tell them things like cover your drink, be aware ... if you're with somebody you don't want to be with, walk away."

It's part of the larger message she imparts to younger students: "We tell them, you know, if all of these women who have been attacked could come back and say something to these girls, do you'd think they'd say, 'Gee, I'm so glad I took it easy on [my attacker],' Bergman says. "No, they would tell them ... you do what you have to do.

"You're worth it. You don't have to fight for anybody else, just you." ■



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