

Class empowers girls against sexual assault

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By **SANDY ILLIAN BOSCH**

Margaret Lamb was a little nervous as she arrived at the Pleasant Dale Park District last Friday night. But the Burr Ridge eighth-grader emerged a couple of hours later with a new confidence: She can take care of herself.

Lamb attended Fight Like a Girl, a self-protection class offered by the park district for girls 14-18. Led by Bruce Gunderson of The Winning Edge Group of Park Ridge, the class teaches girls and women to avoid dangerous situations and to use their natural strengths to escape them.

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Margaret Lamb of Burr Ridge drops to the ground and goes into a "safety position" against instructor Bruce Gunderson during the Fight Like a Girl class at Pleasant Dale Park District.

(Doings photo by Steve Johnston)

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Instructor Bruce Gunderson talks to girls about putting themselves in a safe situation during the Fight Like a Girl class at the Pleasant Dale Park District.

(Doings photo by Steve Johnston)

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Ashley Kleskon of Willow Springs learns to use her lower body strength to defend herself against an attack during the Fight Like a Girl women's self-protection class at the Pleasant Dale Park District.

(Doings photo by Steve Johnston)

A martial arts and self defense instructor for more than 30 years, Gunderson has taught the Fight Like a Girl class for more than three years. Developed by an Arizona police officer, Fight Like a Girl is an interactive, hands-on program that teaches women the physical skills and techniques necessary to protect themselves and to escape violent situations.

Unfortunately, sexual assault is all too common, especially among women in the early years of college, Gunderson said. As many as one in four girls in this age group will be sexually assaulted, he said. That makes the teen years the perfect time for Fight Like a Girl.

Barbara Lamb, Margaret's mother, said her daughter will start high school next year. That means more freedom, more social interaction and perhaps more potentially dangerous situations.

"The last thing you want to do is scare them," Lamb said, but like any mother, she also wants her daughter to be aware of the dangers and to have the tools to take care of herself.

During the Friday night class Margaret gained information about what situations are best avoided in order to stay safe. She learned that although a victim certainly is afraid, the attacker also is afraid of being caught and of being hurt. Half the time, Gunderson said, a woman can escape an attack simply by showing that she's willing to fight.

The class teaches women to use their own strengths, as well as an attacker's weaknesses, to protect themselves. In what might seem at first counterproductive, Fight Like a Girl teaches women to drop to the ground in the event of an attack. This, Gunderson explained, is where she's able to make maximum use of her lower body strength. It also puts the attacker's most vulnerable spots within kicking distance.

Margaret and the other students practiced their techniques on a fully padded Gunderson, whom the once-nervous and admittedly shy Margaret said made her feel at ease.

"He was really encouraging," she said.

The Fight Like a Girl class will be offered again Friday, May 1, from 7 to 9 p.m. Recreation Supervisor Cindy Yelich, who brought Fight Like a Girl to Pleasant Dale, said women of all ages are welcome, although the material might be a little sensitive for girls younger than 14.

On March 20 and May 15, Gunderson will offer Level II of the Fight Like a Girl course.

"Level II deals with date rape and more social situations," Gunderson said. It can be taken with or without the completion of Level I and is especially valuable to girls preparing for college, he said.

Cost of either two-hour course is \$76 for residents, \$104 for nonresidents. Call (630) 662-6220 to register. For information about other opportunities for Fight Like a Girl instruction, visit www.thewinningedgegroup.com.