

northwest

Curious about Personal Safety?

Self-defense with a queer bend

by Jaymee R. Cuti

It's a typical rowdy evening on Stark Street's vivid strip of gay night life. Bars are closing, and revelers are scattering to their respective abodes. While walking to the bike you chained a few blocks away, your muscles clench as you feel the presence of someone behind you. This scenario and many more "greatest fears" of sexual minority people will be addressed in an upcoming workshop focusing on personal safety in the queer community.

Personal safety is an issue affecting all Portlanders, but some queer people feel particularly vulnerable to being victimized because of their sexual orientation. According to experts, misinformation about the realities of domestic violence in same-sex relationships or an untrusting relationship with police keep sexual minorities from reporting attacks or seeking the knowledge to prevent them.

"The education for personal safety is similar for everyone. However, people in the queer community have an interest in bias crimes and preventing an attack and what to do if we are targeted," said Sara Johnson, director of WomenStrength, a free self-defense program for women and girls offered through the Portland Police Bureau.

Johnson, who is a lesbian, has teamed up with William Warren, crime prevention coordinator for the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, to hold a queer-specific personal safety workshop later this month. The free workshop will cover prevention

strategies, ways to identify whether participants are being targeted for an attack and the pros and cons of various options for ending an attack.

"Assertiveness and intuition are two of the key components in preventing any kind of potential attack," said Johnson. "If we truly trust our intuition and act on it assertively, it's easier for us to leave before we are a victim."

The workshop will include a discussion designed to help participants identify their risks, evaluate their strength and explore options for dealing with the threat of violence. Johnson and Warren will teach the workshop.

"We'll delve a little deeper into the specifics of bias crime. We'll also talk about domestic violence and sexual health awareness within the gay community," said Johnson.

Detective Molly Daul, who investigates bias crimes for the bureau, and Kim Phillips-Clark, an advocate from the district attorney's office, will also speak about situations where sexual minorities are particularly vulnerable and what to do if an attack occurs.

The workshop will begin with the group making a list of "what if" scenarios, their worst fears or situations where they feel particularly vulnerable. Throughout the class, each scenario will be responded to so participants will feel prepared the next time they find themselves in such situations.

Typical WomenStrength classes include some

survival-level fighting skills such as strikes to vulnerable targets on the body and escapes from holds. However, this co-ed workshop is nonphysical.

Since its inception in 1979, WomenStrength has engaged approximately 20,000 women and girls in discussions and activities that center not only around physical skills to combat street violence, but tough issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault. Johnson says domestic violence is still a topic shrouded by misinformation in same-sex relationships.

"In classes I've taught before, people seem to think we're sheltered from domestic violence. I think there are still a lot of people that don't think it exists as much as in the straight community," she said.

Although an attack is never the victim's fault, Johnson says there are strategies everyone can implement to keep them safe in a variety of situations.

"Somebody chooses to attack somebody else, and it's never the fault of the person that's attacked. I can go to this workshop, use every tool that's given to me and still be attacked. However, if I have the tools, I can maybe identify more easily if I'm being targeted. Then maybe I can prevent it," Johnson said. **10**

A free personal safety workshop for adults will be held from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. July 18 at Gateway Children's Center, 10225 E. Burnside St. To register call 503-988-6430.



Sara Johnson is teaching a self-defense workshop designed specifically for the queer community.



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