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Middle-school age girls from Faubion Elementary in northeast Portland unite with faculty members to celebrate their participation in GirlStrength, a free self-defense class offered at many Portland schools. PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Girls Empowered

Gaining strength against abuse

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Bullying, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and violence in schools and at home reflect age-old societal norms in need of reversal.

According to U.S. statistics, one in three women will experience domestic violence in their lives. One in three teens knows a peer that has been abused by their partner. Nearly 50 percent of college women report having experienced violent or abusive dating behaviors.

At age 12, girls are also vulnerable to gangs and more likely to be lured into sex-trafficking, and because girls are more likely to be sexually abused by someone they know, their voices are often silenced.

Thirty-years-ago, police began offering free anti-rape classes called WomenStrength for ladies to learn self-defense. Now, its little

sister program, GirlStrength, which began in 2008, reach out to a younger generation of women. If its success rate ripples, the days of silence for women suffering abuse may be over.

In GirlStrength, girls aged 10 to 14 in elementary and middle schools are learning

With a blackbelt in martial arts and a theater education, GirlStrength Coordinator Carolyne Haycraft, is not backing down on the program's mission to foster awareness, demystify fear, and empower girls to be strong and confident.

"If you're outside walking by yourself, your instincts pop in. You can defend, call 911, or run to the closest house."

— Myeesha Morris

to fight back, both physically and emotionally. Northeast Portland's Faubion Elementary school became one of the first Portland Public School to implement the volunteer-run nine-week course.

"We don't want them to be afraid," Haycraft said.

Seventh grade girls at Faubion's pre K-8 school ally with instructor Lisa Ernst throughout the week. She teaches them that in dan-

gerous scenarios, "being nice" is not their only option.

Girls learn to use their voice through self-esteem and relationship-building skills. They practice how to respond to bullying, physical attacks, and dating issues with role-play scenarios. Striking, kicking, and screaming are among the physical skills girls learn that may save them in a surprise attack situation.

For many, hearing their own scream for the first time is alarming for those who begin the class timid and shy, but as the weeks progress, the girls get louder, more serious, and empowered.

"Around week four, the girls start to open up to you and each other," said Ernst, a hairdresser by trade who completed 130 hours of intensive training to teach GirlStrength.

As a safe space just for girls, students learn to ally and form new relationships with each other, instead of letting cliques isolate them. Sidney Bir, an 8th grader who took GirlStrength last year, said she learned how to protect herself and the people around her.

"If someone was being bullied, I'd go stand next to them, and it might make the bully feel intimidated," said Bir.

The class also aims to expose girls to realities of the outside world, like pimps and Johns and the decoys of prostitution. The

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