

Women's self-defense class offered by police

By **ONOFRIO CASTIGLIA**

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WINCHESTER — The women attending a basic self-defense class Wednesday night hosted by the city police department laughed and had fun, but what they were training for was no laughing matter.

Four times a year, the department, in partnership with The Laurel Center in Winchester — which aids victims of domestic and sexual violence — hosts a Women's Self Defense I class. The class uses lectures and practice sessions to teach women the basics of how to stay out of violent situations, and how to respond if they find themselves in one.

About 20 women participated in the Wednesday night class, which was conducted by Winchester Police Department Capt. Doug Watson.

Watson — who has an extensive experience in martial arts — gave a one-hour lecture on handling the stress of an attack, how to respond to one, and how to prevent one from ever happening, before leading a hands-on introduction to self-defense methods.

"You have to have it in your mind, that 'I will not be a victim,' " Watson said during the class. "[You have to say] 'I will win, I will do whatever it takes to win, and if someone tries to make me a victim, they made a mistake.' " Some on the things taught during the class included basic striking techniques like proper punching and kneeling, and evasive maneuvers to get out of bearhugs and chokeholds.

"It's about keeping yourself safe and out of bad situations, whenever possible," Watson said. "Hopefully, they never need to."

Alison Hyman, a sexual assault victim advocate with The Laurel Center, organizes the classes and aids in the demonstrations.

"It's about raising awareness among women in the area, and giving them confidence," Hyman said.

She said most abused women know their attacker, and attacks don't usually happen "in a dark alley," and so confidence and awareness can be important factors in preventing abuse.

“Having confidence helps you not look like a victim,” Hyman said, adding that in police interviews, rapists have said that they “attacked someone because they looked like a victim.”

Twice a year, a counterpart to the class is also hosted, called Women's Self Defense II (Advanced), which focuses on more sophisticated self-defense tactics.

The program was started by Sgt. Ricky Timbrook with the Shelter for Abused Women (now The Laurel Center) in the 1990s, but ended after he was killed in the line of duty in 1999.

Watson started the program up again in 2003.

Women interested in either the basic or advanced self-defense classes can register through the Laurel Center by calling Alison Hyman at 540-667-6160. The classes are free and open to the public. Attendees should wear comfortable clothing. The basic class requires some mild physical activity and the advanced class requires some moderate physical activity.

— Contact Onofrio Castiglia at ocastiglia@winchesterstar.com



Desiree Washington assumes a fighting stance before delivering a knee to a punching pad held by Alison Hyman of The Laurel Center.



Capt. Doug Watson of the Winchester Police Department demonstrates to women taking part in a department-sponsored self-defense class how to get out of the bearhug placed on him by Hyman.