

Carlie's Crusade: Empowering children and adults

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Kelsie Rosado of Newburgh stomps the practice dummy's "instep."

By Jennifer L. Warren

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She could have been the girl next door.

Young, beautiful and energetic with a zest for life, Carlie Brucia was abducted, raped and killed on Feb. 4, 2004. Her assailant, Joe Smith, awaits execution on Florida's death row. Carlie was just 11 when she was snatched at a car wash in Sarasota, Fla., on Super Bowl Sunday. Her body was discovered three days later, buried under rocks, after Smith confessed to the crime.

In Newburgh, a group of police officers, teachers, martial arts instructors and retirees joined to create a Carlie's Crusade organization, a not-for-profit charity and educational foundation. Work began on its development in 2004, and by 2006 Carlie's Crusade became official. Its purpose was clear.

"Our goal is to teach children how not to be a target," said Dominick Magistro, a retired IBM worker and a martial arts and Carlie's Crusade instructor. "We try to prepare them so they won't be a victim if it does happen."

There are about 145 abductions like Carlie's in the United States each year, police say, and in about half of those incidents the victim ends up dead.

There are 24,000 registered sex offenders in New York state alone. Most have committed multiple attacks. Currently, 25 sex offenders are registered in Newburgh. The numbers don't include offenders who were released from parole, probation or incarceration prior to 1996; they are not required to register.

"It's a horrible, scary subject, but no one ever leaves one of our classes scared," said Carlie's Crusade instructor John Generose, a Newburgh city police officer and martial arts instructor. "We do everything we can to make it fun."

On July 25, six girls, ages 11-12, could be spotted walking around the perimeter of the Town of Newburgh's Cronomer Park — backs straight, shoulders squared, heads up, acutely aware of their surroundings. They were putting into action a lecture they had just received about self-confidence.

"We really stress the effective use of body language to empower kids to keep an attacker away," Generose said. He used the analogy of a fierce Chihuahua and a passive St. Bernard. "You can be the one no one

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will mess with, not because of your size, but how you present yourself."

Later in the session, the six girls, part of Newburgh's Big Sisters program, were practicing what they had learned about minimal critical distance with strangers — screaming "Get back!" as loudly as they could, while looking their "assailant" in the eyes and stepping back.

"It's OK to yell and scream if you have to; one of your most powerful weapons is your voice," Generose told the group of attentive girls. "It's a weapon you will always have to scare the attacker, make noise and get witnesses."

Carlie's Crusade emphasizes using wits rather than force.

"The No. 1 one most powerful weapon you have is your head," Magistro told the girls. "Next is your voice." They nodded.

But the group also learned and practiced escaping and releasing techniques, including the best way to kick.

"The key is to get away," said Carlie's Crusade instructor David Magistro, Dominick's nephew, who is a Poughkeepsie city police officer and martial arts instructor.

In addition to abduction prevention, Carlie's Crusade addresses Internet safety, sexual abuse and rape. No two sessions are exactly the same. "All programs cater to the individual groups' needs," Magistro said.

And the classes can include anyone, male or female, from kindergarten to senior citizens. "Basically, we'll teach anyone who can sit long enough," Generose said. "This material is that important to know."

Carlie's Crusade considers it crucial to keep the memory of Carlie alive. Instructors begin each class by speaking of her short but full life, and wear blue T-shirts with the foundation's insignia emblazoned. Each also dons a special blue pin, an angel wrapping its arms around a child, wearing a fuchsia-colored dress. Blue and pink were Carlie's favorite colors.

So far, the Newburgh Carlie's Crusade organization has trained 14,000 kids and 7,500 parents in five counties. To have Carlie's Crusade visit your school or organization, call Dominick Magistro at 309-2961 or John Generose at 742-5614.

Daniela Rivera of Newburgh practices her escaping techniques with Carlie's Crusade instructor John Generose.

Kelsie Rosado of Newburgh stomps the practice dummy's "instep."

Johnae Herring slaps the practice dummy as David Magistro braces it. They were practicing slaps to the face to keep an attacker from getting close enough to grab them.

Estefany Tinoco fends off a make-believe "attacker" held by David Magistro.

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