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Lamorinda Jiu-Jitsu and Kickboxing women's self-defense class empowers participants

By Emma Wong



Photo provided

The Lamorinda Jiu-Jitsu and Kickboxing studio hosted its bimonthly women's self-defense class on Aug. 20. The 90-minute session taught participants strategies to confront potential predators and prevent assaults.

Eighteen female participants - including middle and high schoolers, college students, and adults - attended this month's class, including Colbie Freese, a sophomore at Campolindo High School. "I came here to learn more about self-defense," Freese said. "Self-defense is super important for all women and girls to become empowered and be able to fight back when the opportunity arises."

According to the Lamorinda Jiu-Jitsu and Kickboxing website, class attendees learn "dynamic striking skills from any position, effective strategies for any attack, [and] the ability to stay calm in high-stress situations."

Coach Stephanie Moon, owner of Lamorinda Jiu-Jitsu and Kickboxing, led the class alongside Coach Melissa Quintana-Velete. Moon is a Gracie Jiu-Jitsu black belt and a lauded MMA, boxing, and Muay Thai champion. Quintana-Velete is an active coach and a Muay Thai-kickboxing specialist with over 20 years of experience.

"People ask what the most effective way to defend yourself is," Quintana-Velete said. "I think any martial art can be effective because it gives you confidence to say 'back up, what do you want?' and 'I can handle myself.'"

Participants learned core concepts of self-defense, including the four stages of assault. In stage one, the attacker identifies a subject. To initiate stage two, the attacker grabs the subject. During stage three, the attacker tackles the victim to the ground. In stage four, the assault is committed.

Moon's class aims to prevent women from entering stage one by teaching awareness.

"It's always important to be aware: make eye contact and stay off your phone," Moon said. "It's been statistically proven that when women fight back, they fare better." The National Institute of Justice reports that more than half of women who use physical resistance prevent sexual assault.

During the early stages, the class stresses escaping an attacker at first contact. "When someone grabs you, you have to start fighting back right away. Don't get into their car or go anywhere with them," Moon said.

Should the assault progress to stage two, the women learned how to respond to physical threats, from an assaulter grabbing their wrist to being caught in a headlock. "We teach things like wrist escapes and ponytail grabs, which we have participants practice at home," Moon said. "[The moves] become visceral so you don't have to think about them."

In stage three, when an attacker pushes the victim to the floor, ground exercises are critical for escape. The women practiced breaking their falls and returning to a fighting stance. If pushed back down, they rehearsed a "guard get-up," an exercise stemming from jiu-jitsu. The last exercises dealt with stage four. Participants turned the tide against their attackers with techniques such as arm-bars - a type of martial arts hold.

The women formed a tight-knit community, partnering up to rehearse each tactic. "The community is really important, with all these girls gathering together for the same purpose," Stanley Middle School student Zoe Freese said.

In addition to a good workout, women across grade and age levels gained training and knowledge from the class. "I loved how educational the class was," Colbie Freese said. "We learned the techniques, but we also learned why we performed them and how they can be more effective. Not only was it very hands-on, but we also learned what happens in a self-defense situation."

Statistics on assault in the United States highlight the need for self-defense, especially among women. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's 2022 Violence Against Women report, 91% of sexual assault and rape victims are female, with cases often involving intimate partners or other acquaintances.

Additionally, the CDC reports that more than 1 in 2 women and nearly 1 in 3 men have experienced sexual assault in their lifetime.

The importance of self-defense is not limited to women. "We want this class to be available to all people, not just girls and women," Moon said. "You can fight back. Unfortunately, a lot of victims are attacked by someone they know. It's never the victims' fault."

"The key takeaway is that you can believe in and stand up for yourself," Quintana-Velete said. "There are a lot of dangerous people out there. Even just using your voice and telling people to stay away is very powerful."

Lamorinda Jiu-Jitsu and Kickboxing also offers jiu-jitsu, Muay-Thai kickboxing, adult wrestling, and kids' martial arts classes. Women's Brazilian jiu-jitsu sessions are held every Saturday at 9 a.m. For more details, visit <https://lamorindajujitsu.com/>.

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