

## Norwich self-defense class offers empowerment

Teacher: Idea came from statistics of abused local women

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By CHARLES EDENBURN

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Norwich, Conn. —

Brenda Thibeault's daughter Becca is heading off to college next year and Thibeault wanted to make sure her daughter knows how to defend herself.

So the Preston resident signed her up for a self-defense class at Bethsaida Community Inc. in Norwich, which provides housing for homeless and abused women. Thibeault works there as a finance property manager.

Becca Thibeault, 17, who will be a senior at Griswold High School this fall, was among about a dozen women who attended the self-defense training course Tuesday at the Katie Blair House in Norwich. It was taught by Bethsaida Executive Director Claire Silva.

Silva said she came up with the idea for the class after reviewing statistics from the community's 2008 residents. Of the 31 women who received housing and support services through the Katie Blair House program last year, 61 percent had been assaulted as adults and 42 percent as children. Silva said she hopes to empower Bethsaida residents by having them study self-defense. She said she has studied Kempo Jitsu, a modern form of the martial art jujitsu, for five years.

"When you hear the women's life stories, it is upsetting and difficult to fully grasp what they have endured and survived," she said. "For most of our women, it is hard for them to feel in control of their own bodies. I'm hoping this self-defense class will help them gain an awareness of their surroundings, to see their bodies as powerful, and to learn how to protect themselves."

Aisha Celestin of Norwich, who is studying human services at the University of Connecticut, recently completed an internship at the Katie Blair House. She attended the self-defense lesson with her daughter, Belinda French, 8.

"I like to get involved in women's issues to better the community," she said.

Eileen McAvoy, who lives at the Katie Blair House, also took the class.

"I wanted to learn this because I was a victim of domestic violence in the past, and I just wanted to learn to defend myself," she said.

The class taught a variety of striking maneuvers that could be used to fend off attackers, including blows to the legs, torso and head.

Katie Blair House resident Geneva Washington said she took the class to acquire some self-discipline.

“I always fought growing up, and I fought for my brothers, my sisters and my friends,” Washington said. “I felt I needed some discipline so I wouldn’t be violent or in any trouble, and I wanted to be able to deal with anger in a better way.”

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