

# Locals learn protection tips

By Alex J. Berkman

A loud thud resounded through the gymnasium at the Northern Neck Family YMCA in Kilmarnock as Christopher Allen slammed to the floor.

Allen, a lieutenant at Haynesville Correctional Center, hit the blue mats on the gym floor to show nearly 30 women methods of deterring an attacker.

In response to the recent sexual assaults in the Chase Street area of downtown Kilmarnock, the self-defense class was organized to educate women what to do in the circumstance they encounter an attacker.

"I'm not teaching you to win a fight, I'm teaching you to what?," Allen asked the more than 25 women of varying ages sitting in the bleachers.

"Survive it," the women responded in unison.

Allen, who trains correctional officers for the Virginia Department of Corrections, led the women through a special defense system he designed, called ACE—acknowledge, counter, evade.

"If you do nothing else but pay attention to your surroundings you will be 90 percent safer than you are now," Allen said. "This is what will make or break



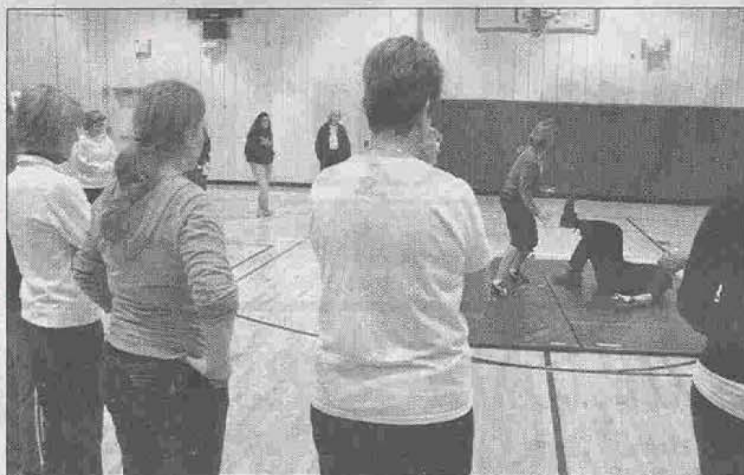
Christopher Allen, a lieutenant at Haynesville Correctional Center, recently showed a group of women methods to deter an attacker.

Photo by Alex J. Berkman

you in a stressful situation."

The heightened sense of caution among Kilmarnock's female residents comes after two sexual assaults on women in their own homes during the early mornings of Nov. 28 and Dec. 3.

Multiple suspects have been identified in the attacks, but no one has been arrested or charged with the crimes yet, said Mike Bedell, chief of the Kilmarnock



Onlookers learn how to ward off attackers during a YMCA women's self defense class. (Photo by Alex J. Berkman)

## Defense

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Police Department.

Bedell, who lives on Chase Street, said that anxieties have lessened a bit, but far from completely, since no one has been taken into custody.

"They've lowered to a certain extent," Bedell said.

Evidence collected from the crime scenes is being compared to DNA samples taken from the suspects identified in the case at the state crime lab, Bedell said.

Rumors of further break-ins and assaults are false, Bedell said, adding that he thinks they have stopped because the assailant is one of the identified suspects.

But, women in Kilmarnock are still on high-alert and are preparing themselves for the worst situations.

The self-defense class, held on Dec. 17, was first advertised by the YMCA on Thursday morning. By that evening, the 30 spots had been taken and the waiting list was filling quickly, a YMCA representative said.

Allen, who will hold a second class on Jan. 7, taught the women at the class how to defend themselves against an attacker in different scenarios, including being chased, grabbed or thrown to the ground.

The class began with Allen explaining the need for awareness of your surroundings.

Have an escape plan, know where exits are, pay attention to the environment around you, be wary of suspicious people and most importantly, Allen said, trust your intuition.

Allen also told a story about two police officers in New York City. On a hot summer day, a veteran police officer and a rookie pulled up to a gas station. The older officer tells the newbie to go in and get him something. When the younger officer walked up to the door, he stopped, turned around and told his superior something is wrong and he couldn't go in.

The veteran officer said he was being foolish and went inside himself. As he was waiting in line, a man turned around, pulled out a shotgun and shot him.

When asked why he didn't go inside, the younger officer said something was wrong, but couldn't put his finger on it. He later realized it was the person in a trench coat on a hot, muggy summer day that didn't seem right.

This story is a perfect example of trusting your "animal instincts" when something seems wrong, Allen urged.

"You need to heighten your senses a little bit," Allen said. "Engage your environment."

The class, which was generally upbeat and punctuated by Allen's humorous anecdotes and the women's laughter, ended on a serious note.

After showing the women ways to fend off attackers and cause enough to pain until they are able to run and seek help, Allen explained the importance of superficially damaging an assailant and remembering identifying characteristics.

"You need to mark your attacker," Allen urged. "If you scratch, you remember where you scratched. If you bite him, you'll remember where you bit him."

Allen, who explained that he works around rapists in their "home" everyday, closed the class with an encouraging statement for the women in the gymnasium.

"They are cowards," Allen said. "They're predators. They prey on weaker people."

For more information on registration for the Jan. 7 self-defense class, call Northern Neck Family YMCA at (804) 435-0223 or visit [peninsulaymca.org](http://peninsulaymca.org).

To report emergencies, suspicious activity or tips regarding the sexual assaults and suspects call 911, or for anonymity call Lancaster County Crime Solvers at (804) 462-7463.