
The Oregonian

FEBRUARY 13, 2008

In a word, Portland teen protects girls



S. Renee Mitchell

Even with the airlines' more-restrictive baggage limit, I was able to transport some of Portland's creative spirit to New Orleans. I'm here for a national sexual-assault training for law enforcement officers, lawyers, nurses and domestic violence workers from across the country.

The conference, titled Transforming Our Nation's Response to Rape, is looking for new ideas - besides legal remedies -- to help victims. So, I'm importing a suggestion the folks in the room might not have heard: "Just Yell Fire."

This 2-year-old free DVD, created, co-written and starring Dallas Jessup, an honors student at St. Mary's Academy in downtown Portland, teaches easy-to-learn self-defense moves and reminds viewers that, sadly, a distress call of "FIRE!" is more likely to draw a stranger's intervention than "HELP!"

"Teens are just realizing that they have this veil of not knowing that they can stand up for themselves," says Jessup, who has a black belt in tae kwon do and turned 16 in December. "A lot don't even know they have a right to get out of that or even how to get out of that."

The "Just Yell Fire" message is targeted toward teenage girls, since females 12 to 24 are at the greatest risk of experiencing a sexual assault. In addition, nearly 60,000 children are abducted by strangers each year; many never return home alive.

"Women are taught to be nurturing and kind to people," Jessup says. "When people overstep their boundaries and try to create harm to you, we don't turn to our get-away instincts."

But now, thousands of young girls in schools, libraries, shelters and camps in the United States and in 37 countries are learning that they can participate in their own safety. After sharing her message, Jessup has received a standing ovation from FBI employees and private confessions of young girls' secrets.

"They'll write saying 'I was gang raped.' 'I was tortured,' " recalls Jessup's proud mom and business partner, Maggie Jessup. "People come up to her and confide in her because she's their age, they trust her."

In the two years since the movie was posted online at www.justyellfire.com the Web site has gotten more than 4.5 million hits. The Jessups said that of the 325,000 people who have downloaded the free DVD, 26,000 live in Iran, where women are legally treated worse than most Portlanders handle their family pets.

Later this month, Jessup will find out if she won the children's category of the Volvo For Life national contest, just one of a growing number of local and national recognitions. Last year, Jessup received a CNN Heroes Award. And she is one of 115 finalists for MTV's 2008 BRICK Awards, which CNN dubbed "the Oscars of youth service awards."

The winners will be chosen in March. In addition, this month Jessup was notified that she will receive a Caring Award from the Caring Institute, a Washington, D.C., foundation inspired by Mother Teresa.

Jessup also has gotten the support of Gov. Ted Kulongoski to integrate the video into school curriculums. In addition, she and her mom are developing a train-the-trainers course to teach physical-ed coaches the "Just Yell Fire" moves.

Despite her hectic schedule, Jessup's weekdays are dedicated to maintaining her 3.7 grade point average. Sundays, she spends hours packaging the "Just Yell Fire" DVDs. Donations pay the postage.

In her spare time, Jessup says she relishes just being a teenager. "You can't live your life in a box," she says. "You should be able to go outside, have fun, go to parties and hang out with your friends. And when you have a gut feeling that something is wrong, go with that and don't stay there."

From the mouth of a child comes the point of my speech today: Empowering victims is everyone's job.

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