

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Getting a Kick out of Museum's Krav Maga Event

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By:

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Participants practice a kicking exercise during a Krav Maga class with the Young Friends of the National Museum of American Jewish History. Photo by Jessi Melcer

In conjunction with programming to honor International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Young Friends of the National Museum of American Jewish History hosted a Krav Maga course taught by David Kahn and Don Melnick, instructors and co-owners at Israeli Krav Maga in Cherry Hill, N.J., on Jan. 26.



For those of you who are unfamiliar with it, Krav Maga is kind of karate on steroids. It's intense and is meant to prepare you for realistic situations where you might need the discipline's techniques, but it also focuses on practical thinking and assessing situations.

And it's the official self-defense training system of the Israel Defense Forces.

So naturally, when I was asked to cover it and partake in the class, I was a bit apprehensive.

At 5-foot-1 (the "1" is important to me), I'm not exactly intimidating. When I'm angry, my voice gets higher and my chances of scaring off a predator decrease tenfold. My main response to catcallers or other creepy people I encounter in the city is flipping my middle finger.

Basically, when you think of the target in a situation that would require the acts of something like Krav Maga, I probably fit the bill.

I'm not sure what I was expecting from the class — but it was actually pretty fun — well, as fun as it can be when you're learning self-defense techniques that include possibly gouging someone's eye out.

We were taught a few basic moves that can be built on for more intense routines. Then we partnered up and practiced, including kicking a chair but imagining that it was an attacker's knee. Practically everyone was a beginner, and I wasn't the only one with concerns about being too short to actually reach someone's knee when attempting to kick them.

We learned how to get out of a seemingly inescapable situation where an attacker is gripping your wrist, or coming at you from behind.

The instructors walked around, helping and practicing with everyone, which was good because, as the girl I partnered with would tell you, my grip is not very strong. (I'm not selling myself very well here, am I?)

Kahn, who is the Israeli Krav Maga Association U.S. chief instructor, trained with Rick Blitstein, one of the first Americans to teach Krav Maga in the United States, after they met in 1995 while Kahn was in law school in Florida — though his career took a different turn. Blitstein had trained with the father of Krav Maga, Imi Lichtenfeld.

"I'm not the best," Kahn admitted. "Don is not the best. But we were trained by the best."

If you want a history lesson in Krav Maga, Kahn definitely is one to talk to. He and Melnick have written five books on the subject, with another two coming this spring.

In brief summation, the self-defense system started in the 1930s after Lichtenfeld developed it for the Jewish community in Slovakia as protection against the growing wave of anti-Semitism as World War II approached. His system took elements from contact activities like boxing and wrestling (which Lichtenfeld had experience in) and put it in a modern context.

In Krav Maga, contact that is prohibited in other disciplines is definitely allowed — eye strikes, destroying joints, kicks to the leg/knee/groin, hitting the throat — you get the idea.

"It's all 'dirty' fighting, but it's meant to injure, as opposed to hurt," Kahn explained.

In any case, Lichtenfeld's system went on to be used for the "fledgling," as Kahn put it, Israeli army as the War of Independence began. He was appointed as the hand-to-hand combat instructor, a position he held until 1964, at which point he started developing a system for ordinary men and women — like me and the others in the class.

Melnick came across Krav Maga by accident.

He had seen an email from the Katz JCC in Cherry Hill about a Krav Maga seminar, which he only thought of as the "Jewish karate thing." He decided to go check it out.

“I walk in the room, and there’s three other people and I’m the youngest one there — and I’m 36 at the time — and I’m like, what did I get myself into?” he recalled. “David walks into the room, puts us through a two-hour seminar and I’m just blown away by the history, the practicality, the ease of use, the simplicity of it — everything about it was just fascinating to me.”

A few classes — and a year and a half later — Melnick became an instructor and taught his own classes at the JCC. He had Kahn do another seminar, which led to a 10-week program. Eventually, they opened a second location in Cherry Hill (the first was in Hamilton).

“If I didn’t get that email, I don’t know what I’d be doing right now,” he said.

Being able to teach others ways to make sure they get home safe and their family gets home safe is what Melnick loves about the discipline.

“It’s not tournament, it’s not competition fighting,” Melnick said. “It’s real world, save-your-life, do whatever it takes to get home safe, get your family home safe at the end of the day — and that is what we focus on and that’s what I love teaching.”

As a father of two young daughters, Melnick has also paid special attention to women’s self-defense. His daughters have already been training for a few years, he said, “so I want to know when they’re of dating age that I don’t have anything to worry about.”

I’m sure he’s not the only father who feels that way.

The bit about women’s self-defense was interesting to me. All but one or two of the participants at the event were women. Kahn even demonstrated a potential scenario a woman could use to fight off a rapist.

It connected with me because, unfortunately, this is definitely something women have to think about. Learning self-defense would come in handy in many occasions. Though it shouldn’t be necessary, even just having the knowledge that you could fight off a potential attacker could help alleviate some of that uneasy edge a woman feels when walking by herself — and I can tell you that doesn’t only happen at night.

Learning more about Krav Maga, which I — like Melnick — didn’t really know anything beyond that it’s an intense kind of karate thing and maybe it’s a good workout, definitely gave me a lot to think about.

I expected to walk out with the fear that the next day my muscles would be really sore (which might have only happened because they had been out of use as far as exercise for longer than I care to admit). Instead, I walked out intrigued — safety is definitely something to think about no matter where you are.

As Kahn said, “the only conflict you’re able to prevail or win is the one you don’t get into.”

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