

"Yeah, I Fight Like a Girl"

And **Pooja Nagpal, 18**, wants to show girls in need how to do the same by teaching them confidence through self-defense.

by ANDREA STANLEY

17: SO HOW DID YOU GET INTO MARTIAL ARTS?

I was taking ballet, but whenever I was in class, my teacher would say, "That looks like a martial arts kick, not a ballet kick." So when I was 5, I started taking tae kwon do and loved it. Now I have a secondary black belt [the level above a black belt] in tae kwon do. Having that skill has always given me confidence.

17: HOW DID THAT TURN INTO YOUR NONPROFIT, FOR A CHANGE, DEFEND?

In 2013, I started hearing about cases of violence against women. One attack in India really touched me, since my family is from there, and I had friends who experienced assault where I live in Los Angeles, too. Recently I heard from the police that although crime has gone down, assaults against women have gone up. It was like, Enough—it's time to give girls their power back. I partnered with local domestic-violence shelters and began offering free self-defense classes. I also teach in India in the summers. So far, I've instructed about 1,000 girls. I wanted to teach girls my age because when you see someone like you doing something, you believe you can do it too.

17: WHAT'S ONE OF YOUR CLASSES LIKE?

My biggest thing is giving girls the strength to use their voices. When we're punching and kicking, I tell them to make noises. It's like, Yeah, I'm here and I'm strong. And then I teach hard-core techniques, like what to do if someone grabs you from behind.

17: WHEN DID YOU REALIZE, WOW, THIS IS WORKING?

Teaching someone martial arts is difficult—sometimes I only have an hour—and I began to wonder if what I was doing had any value. But last summer, a girl came in with a broken arm. A family member had beaten her. I trained her for a month, and by the end, not only was she physically stronger, but also all the fear she had when she started was gone. It was amazing.

17: DO YOU EVER FEEL LIKE THE ODD GIRL OUT IN THE MARTIAL ARTS WORLD?

When I was young, the classes I took were usually

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EMPOWERMENT STARTS WITH FEELING CONFIDENT IN YOUR BODY.”

half boys and half girls. But as we got older, a lot of girls dropped out, and now I'm the only female in my classes. It's sad. Today we have role models like Ronda Rousey, but there used to be such a stereotype that girls can't be tough.

17: ANY ADVICE FOR GIRLS WHO WANT TO BE A BADASS LIKE YOU?

Don't let anyone tell you that you're not strong enough—either physically

or mentally. Empowerment starts with feeling confident in your body.

17: WHAT'S NEXT?

I'm teaching self-defense to sex-trafficking victims, and in the fall, I'm going to attend UC Berkeley. With all of the talk about rape culture at colleges, I want to bring what I do to college campuses. I really think that's where the next chapter of my life is taking me.

For more info on For a Change, Defend, visit forachangedefend.com.

"We all have the right to be safe and pursue our dreams without feeling insecure and threatened," Pooja says.



DEFEND YOURSELF

Pooja shares the three tips she wants you to remember.

1 / STAY FLEXIBLE

"Do lots of lower-body stretches so you can use your legs as a weapon if necessary. Kicking is a huge part of female self-defense."

2 / USE WHAT YOU HAVE

"When you feel like a victim, your body may shut down. In times of danger, strike with your elbows and knees, which are extremely strong."

3 / REMAIN ALERT

"Always be aware of your environment. If you're out at night, don't wear headphones. And never be afraid to report harassment."