

## DEB STERN – Martial Artist & Self-Defense Teacher

Can you share a little bit about your story and what brought you to CAE?

I was in a really intense domestic violence situation in California for a year and a half. I had been disconnected from my family, and living with constant physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. I tried to run away at least 10 times. He would do things like lock me in a room or cut the clothes off of my body so I couldn't run outside. I was finally able to escape one day with just the clothes on my body. I came to Brooklyn and heard about CAE through one of my sister's colleagues who had trained in the Children's Empowerment Project years ago. She mentioned that CAE had a Survivors Healing and Prevention Project where you could do free karate or self-defense. I was really afraid of everything and everyone for the first six months I was here. After six months, I finally came to my first karate class. That was March 1, 2009.

Can you describe your experience at CAE?

One of the things that happen when you're traumatized is that you develop tactics to disassociate from your body as a protective mechanism. Karate helped me reconnect with my body and feel what it feels like to be grounded, rooted, and centered, and understand and really feel that I have power. That power is not necessarily the power of my punch or kick, but an inner power. I'm not just training because it is fun and a good workout, and I want to learn how to defend myself. I am training for a greater cause. I am fighting against all of the violence that we suffer from. It has given me a new perspective on making a difference in the world, how we can change patterns of behaviors. It has given me new awareness to understand my own healing journey. CAE has definitely changed my life.

People say that all the time, but what does that really mean?

**I walk down the street differently. I carry myself differently. I think I am a better listener. CAE has helped me create healthy boundaries, and really understand what it means to stand up for myself, find my voice, and honor my voice. I am stronger now than I was before, and I think that a huge part of that is the training at CAE and the community that's been supporting me.**

What else has changed for you?

I was inspired to apply for CAE's teacher training program. Now I am an apprentice self-defense instructor, and really can't imagine a different path. I feel so blessed to have the opportunity to train and give back to other women by teaching. You just don't even know what your capacity is to be a leader until you have an opportunity to build that capacity and be supported. There are also many opportunities to get involved in community activism and building community awareness. Being able to volunteer for something and take on responsibility (like I did for leading the fundraising for the Punch-a-thon Committee last year), I was able to connect my passion, energy and enthusiasm for karate and the work CAE does in the community with spreading the word and advocating for CAE. Three years ago, I was afraid to talk to anyone. When I see photographs, or think of myself then, I was like a deer in headlights, frozen in fear. CAE gave me a chance to reconnect with my true being, to feel safe again, to feel free to express myself and to speak up on behalf of the things I am passionate about.

What are your next steps?

I want to continue on my path of teaching self-defense. I want to keep doing this. I have dreams of developing programs for survivors that involve a combination of yoga and surfing and meditation and martial arts. I think there is a different, really unique energy here— it's an opportunity that we have as women to train together, and goes way beyond the physical, although that is never disregarded. I don't think there is anywhere else in the world that does this kind of work. We need more CAEs all over the city, all over the world! We can create such a force.

## ALESANDRA LIRIANO – Self-Defense Student

Can you share a little bit about yourself and what brought you to CAE?

Well, I've been on a roller coaster of domestic violence relationships. There were three back-to-back starting in 1997. I came to CAE for the first time back in 2000, and completed the four-week self-defense course then. It empowered me then and helped me to defend myself in these three relationships. I returned in 2011 and attended two classes. Then my lung collapsed and I had heart surgery. I had to wait a year before I could continue taking classes. That I couldn't function the way I want to had me bound in a sense, but I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

Can you describe your experience at CAE?

I have been able to tell my story and express some of the things that I have gone through. Hopefully, this has helped others so they know they're not alone. At CAE I feel safe and know that I am not going to be judged. The class empowered me to deal with my anger in a positive way. The class gave me my self-esteem back. It helped me believe in myself.

What have you learned?

You have the right to defend yourself. You do not have to take someone's abuse whether it is verbal, emotional, or physical. My ex had a habit of choking me. I defended myself by kicking him off me and then started striking him. It got him to kind of lay off. After being tired of fighting back and dealing with the abuse, I got an order of protection, which is still in effect. I moved, and started my life over again.

What were your biggest challenges and accomplishments in the self-defense course?

My biggest challenge was my insecurity that other people in the class would stare at me with my cane and home assistant. If anything, people were supportive and understanding. No one made me feel uncomfortable and empathized. I don't like sympathy, I like empathy. I was able to share some of my techniques and stories to help the women to talk instead of pretending that everything is fine. I showed others that even though you are disabled you are not helpless. As a disabled person there is still a lot you can do to defend yourself.

How did it feel to break a board?

I was looking forward to actually breaking a board, and I volunteered to be the first one. I wrote the name of my abusers and the word anger on the board. I was just concentrating on all of the stuff that has gone on in my life in the last 12 years. I told myself, I am just going to let it go, break these barriers and obstacles that I have gone through, and I am going to feel better. My son is 11 and he recorded me breaking the board. He doesn't have to feel like my mom is sick and my father or someone else can hurt her. He looks at the video over and over again and says, "I can't believe you did that."

What makes CAE important for survivors?

**CAE gives us a place to be a community. It gives us a place that we feel like we belong. It is a place to vent; to cry; to empower; and to move forward. To face it instead of avoiding it and denying it. It gives us a way to confront and possess our emotions. To realize it wasn't our fault.**

What is next for you?

I feel like the sky is the limit. I am going to try and take tai chi and chi gong to deal with some of the lingering anger. I plan to write a book about my experiences. I will speak out whenever I have the chance to and motivate others to defend themselves. You can choose to be a victim or choose to be a survivor. And I chose to be a survivor.