

# **My Life Has Changed; Responding to Disclosure**

## **By: Erin Lehman**

I became certified to teach radKids in October of 2002. I knew that when I heard of the program that it was something special, but never had any idea that I would be changing lives, including mine.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I am 21 years old, have been involved in Martial Arts for 15 years, and have been teaching Tae Kwon Do for 8 years. I work for a not for profit rape crisis and domestic violence agency called, The Women's Center, as their Prevention Educator. I have been with this agency for almost four years. In that time, I have taught at least a hundred self-defense "programs". Two years ago, I was introduced to the RAD for Women program, and was impressed. Several RAD classes later, I am still impressed, but have felt like something is missing. You see I have always enjoyed working with kids. Their honesty and character drive me. In the years working at The Women's Center, I have seen many children that have been the victims and targets of violence. I have seen children come through my Tae Kwon Do class that are scared. Scared of going home, scared of the bully at school, scared of that babysitter, and afraid to be alone. It breaks your heart every time, but Martial Arts was not the answer that these kids were looking for. Sure they learned to kick, learned forms, sparring, the correct way to do a push up, etc., but what I was teaching these kids is not what they needed. They needed to learn that they are their own best friend and that they are loved.

When I learned of the radKIDS program, I persisted until permission was granted to get to go. I fought for another instructor to go, also. We had no idea what effect this program would have and we never knew how the children would take to it, but I knew that this was something that we needed to do. Teaching RAD for Women was working, but what about the fact that most people that are assaulted, are assaulted before the age of eighteen. The eighteen year olds that I know have a much stronger voice, then the five to ten year olds. It is the children that I want to help. In the beginning as I like to say it, myself and a police officer, John Allen, from Southern Illinois University got the chance to travel to Houston, Texas to learn to be Adult radKIDS.

Fast-forward now two months. I get my first opportunity to teach a radKIDS program at a local grade school, in one of the nine counties that I cover. John's job duties do not allow him to be at the class the entire time. So, I am on my own with one 3rd Grade teacher, a student aide, and 27 future radKIDS. Now, Mr. Steve had said we would have gifts in each class, but I never expected to have gifts in my very first class like I did.

I had one student who was mildly autistic. She was so much smaller then the other students and when she would look at you, her big eyes were filled with a great amount of innocence. She had her own aide, which was a godsend. This little girl had a hard time all week

learning to tell when it was a trick when we did "Drills on the Fly". She was curious though and loved to get stickers of Kitty Cats. The other kids in the class really looked out for her, like they sensed that she needed to be protected. They were happy to give her their stickers, so she would feel extra special. Seeing these little moments all week really made me see what an honor it was to be with these children to teach them these skills. Even though this was all emotionally stimulating, I couldn't help but feel frustrated inside, hoping that this little girl would learn these skills. She loved the verbal skills, I think because she got to yell in class! She loved to kick the pads and do the color sheets. (She did worksheets from the 5-7 activities, rather than 8-10.) The real test came at the end of the week when we did simulation. She was afraid when she saw John in "The Suit". She asked him if he was going to hurt her. John immediately started to take gear off. He got down on his knees and explained to her that this was practice and he wanted to help her learn. She then went through the first simulation, but fell for the trick and went with John. So he explained to her again. This next time, she stepped into her radKIDS stance and with the most powerful voice yelled, "YOU'RE NOT MY DAD!" and then ran to the safety of her aide where she received cheer and hugs from her classmates! All cheering for her and telling her how great she did. I felt the pride that a parent would. I felt accomplishment, John felt accomplishment, we were proud. This was truly a gift.

A second gift came that week in the form of a boy, who by sight you would've thought, this child is physically strong; I better hold the pads tight when he is practicing his physical skills. However the first time I spoke to him, he started to cry and ran to the bathroom. The teacher then explained to me that she thought maybe something was going on at home, but had no proof, and that child had only said two words to her all semester, "Happy Thanksgiving". She said that even then, it took a lot of courage for him to even say that. I began to think of ways that I could win this child's trust and then thought to myself, the program will teach him. I had faith that it would work. His courage and self-esteem was built beyond belief that next week. Although it took awhile and he never wanted to do anything in front of the class, the program was working. I was seeing something that not even teachers could believe. Even the principle and superintendent came to see the progress because the entire group of grade school teachers were talking about the improvement that this child was seeing just in the first three days of the program. The real gift came on Thursday, when he asked to speak to me. He told me that his father hit him a lot. He showed me old bruises and scars that told stories of horrible abuse. He shared with me that his dad had tried to hit him the night before. He said that he felt strong, and that he got into his radKIDS stance and yelled at his father, "NO!" He ran and hid from his father and he didn't get hit that night. We talked about what we could do together to stop his dad from hitting him ever again. We called the police and even though he was afraid, he wanted to do it. The police came, they took pictures. The Department of Children and Family Services came, they took pictures. The boy got to go stay with his mom that night. From time to time, I check in on that boy. He lives with his mom now, his dad has supervised

visits. All is going well for this child. And for the record, he really beat John up when we did Simulation on Friday. This was truly a gift.

And then there was "Sam's Secret". A third gift came, in the form of a little girl that was extremely quiet. She stayed away from the boys in the class, she stuck to herself. She had a few other quiet girls in the class that she was friends with, but mostly just stayed to herself. She enjoyed all the activities we did that week. I noticed that as the week went on, she became my shadow. I felt like she had something to share, it was just a matter of time. On Thursday, I had a Children's Therapist from the agency that I work for, come and read, "Sam's Secret". I noticed that the little girl was really uncomfortable while listening to the story. She fidgeted on the carpet and squirmed a lot. I knew then that she needed to talk. The Therapist and myself started talking to the kids about who they could talk to if they needed to ever tell someone about something bad that had happened to them. She asked to talk to me, but alone. She wanted to go in the hall. She then began to tell me how her mom's boyfriend sometimes touches her private parts. She said she was afraid of him and wanted him to stop. It made her stomach hurt. I asked her if she could talk to her mom about it. Did she think her mom would believe her? She said she thought so, but was afraid to tell her by herself. Once again, I talked about the police, and DCFS coming to help. I said we could call her mom. She said, "Yes". I called the mom first, she worked down the street from the school, and so she came right away. We told her together what had happened. This little girl was regaining the power that was taken from her. Her mother was like an angel, believing her daughter, asking me what she could do to help her. We called the police and DCFS, they came. I spoke to the mother about getting this man out of their life. The police took a statement; the man was arrested the next day. I hear he goes to trial the first part of March. And for the record, this child also hurt John during Simulation. This was truly a gift.

I have found what I was looking for. The enthusiasm comes to life every time I get the chance to teach this program. I believe what helped me during this whole process, was being able to remain calm. Not acting like I was shocked when these children disclosed to me. I told them that this happens to lots of kids and that it was OK that they told me. I was very lucky that it all happened like it did. When I first became certified to teach the program, I contacted places that I knew would be of support to me. I let DCFS know of the program. When I begin a program, I notify the police in that town of what I am doing. The police were surprised of the calls, but grateful that I had taught the children that it was OK for them to take control of their own lives. Ultimately, all of these children are looking to have some power and control in their lives. It's like one child said, "I am with myself 24 hours a day, I need to know."

I tell every school administrator that I talk to, that their kids deserve to know, that these children will be better for it.

Am I better for it ... YES! Will I continue to teach these skills .. YES! IT WORKS!