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HEEBONICS

Ballerina turns to **MARTIAL ARTS** after surviving attack

By **MICHELLE BITRAN**

Special to The CJN

When Avital Zeisler was in her late teens, she used the Israeli self-defence and combat system of krav maga to save her life. Since that day, she's been determined to teach others the skills they need to protect themselves in dangerous situations.

Zeisler had only completed an introductory course in krav maga when she was unexpectedly attacked by her then-boyfriend.

She thanks her father for enrolling her in the course that gave her the skills to defend herself.

"If I didn't have my training or the knowledge that I had at the time, even though it was minimal, I think I would, God forbid, be dead or in the hospital for sure," she said.

Surviving the attack was a turning point for Zeisler. She began training rigorously in krav maga, going to Israel to learn from the pioneers of the system, and, eventually, she became an instructor herself.

Krav maga translates from Hebrew as "contact combat." It specializes in close-quarters fighting, and it is the preferred self-defence method of the Israel Defence Forces. For Zeisler, it is not just the ultimate street safety system, but also a way to achieve mental and physical strength.

"I've found that, for me, continuing to train in martial arts and krav allowed me to move on from that traumatic experience in a positive and productive way," said Zeisler.

Now, at only 21 years old, she is the only woman in the world to have passed the full instructorship certification program in Israel with the Israeli Krav Maga Association. The IKMA was founded in 1978 by the combat system's creator, Imi Lichtenfeld, and is recognized by the Israeli government as the authority on krav maga.

Zeisler's high-level certification, the product of more than five years of intensive training, has given her the opportunity to work with military and self-defence specialists around the world. Last month, she travelled to New Jersey to train with the martial arts expert of the U.S. Marine Corps.

Before that, she worked with renowned American safety and self-defence consultant Steve Kardian to improve her self-defence techniques and to learn more about personal safety.

"I consult with people, I really get involved, I want to know as much as I can about the issue," said Zeisler of civilian self-defence.

She said that krav maga's instinct-based strategies provide the most effective form of real-life self-

defence.

"I really think that everyone can benefit from training in krav and self-defence because it really does change your mental state. It makes you tougher and stronger."

Over the last year, Zeisler has been visiting high schools to teach students about self-defence. She began with motivational speaking for girls about dating safety and women's self-defence and, now, she includes sessions of krav maga training and combat fitness for both boys and girls.

"If I can prevent one girl from going through what I went through, I feel like I've made a difference," she said. According to Zeisler, the feedback from students, teachers and parents has been "phenomenal."

She is currently working to have the York Region District School Board include krav maga and street self-defence as a mandatory part of the high school physical education curriculum.

When Zeisler is not training and teaching, she is a full-time student at the Schulich School of Business in Toronto. It is her love of business and her passion for self-defence that led her to creating her own company, Soteria Athletics Group.

Soteria, named for the Greek goddess of safety, provides "corporate wellness and corporate safety" instruction for the employees of businesses. Whether it's through lessons in krav maga, combat fitness or nutritional counselling, Zeisler and her team of certified trainers and

nutritionists help companies achieve a safer and healthier work environment.

According to Zeisler, corporate wellness is not just about physical safety and well-being, but "it's also a way of training [employees] mentally to be tougher and stronger in business and to be able to take on more tasks themselves."

When Zeisler looks back, she never would have imagined becoming the krav maga expert that she is today.

Before she started training in the martial arts, Zeisler was a ballerina, studying for two years at Canada's National



Avital Zeisler, 21, a krav maga expert, visits high schools to talk about the importance of self-defence.

[Virgil Knaap photo]

Ballet School, which, she says, comes as a shock to many of her students.

Zeisler credits her dance experience with allowing her to pick up martial arts combinations with ease.

"It's made me aware of my body, of my movement, my co-ordination," she said.

Zeisler still sees herself as a student, eager to learn as much as she can about krav maga. This summer, she's travelling to Israel to participate in an instructors' workshop with the IKMA.

When she returns, Zeisler has big plans. "The goal is to teach as many corporations as possible, to reach as many students as possible. Maybe work on a set of self-defence DVDs, even write a book," she said.

Zeisler is living by example when it comes to the message she has for her students.

"No matter what happens in your life, whether it is awful or tragic, you can move on from it in a positive way, in a meaningful way," she said.

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